Role of Social Media on Deviance and Crime: A Study on Content Creators of Tiktok

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ABSTRACT

During this time of globalization, the mode of recreation and communication has dramatically changed and is oriented around social media. People are finding themselves glued to the screen both for work and entertainment. Like every coin has two sides, these virtual deviances and crime in a society. TikTok is such social media platform that enables us to produce and share short videos and explore ourselves in front of global and local audiences. Recent crime news related to TikTok and the new popular culture of such micro-entertainment prompted this study to add to the literature of cultural criminology. The study aims to scrutinize the uses, features, and contents of the TikTok app to understand its role in crime and deviance in society. It also sheds light on characteristics of crimes and deviances that emanate from TikTok in Bangladesh. The study's methodology is Case Studies of fifteen crime cases related to TikTok, and Qualitative Content Analysis of ten top profiles of TikTok in Bangladesh, and the 'For you' page of TikTok with specific hashtags following convenience sampling. The study found distinct characteristics of crime and deviance related to TikTok, such as performance crime, copycat crime, and fame-driven crime. The study attempted to identify specific crimes such as rape, murder, sexual assault, fraudulence, etc., that have already been committed using this app.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a platform for every kind of communication like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or TikTok. Among these, TikTok has become one of the most popular social media, evidently as this app amassed over 3 billion downloads and engaged around one-third of all social media users around the world in less than four years where it took giants like Facebook and Instagram almost a decade to get a user base that size of TikTok (Dean, 2022). People of Bangladesh have found this short video-making mobile app tempting in entertainment, recreation, and business. This user-friendly platform celebrates real human experiences and stimulates users' creativity by designing easy-to-operate user interfaces and functional video editing tools (Yang, 2020). Because of its attractive design, the population of Generation Zoomers (Gen-Z) is the ones who are the majority of users of this app (Liqian, 2018). The Gen Z population are the people born between 1997 and 2012, who are the technology experts today and are the epitome of self-projection where TikTok is just one of the hundreds of possibilities that gives them a platform to explore (Dilon, 2020). TikTok immensely values the primary audience of this app who are responsible for shaping the business that comes with it as they are the majority of TikTok users in Bangladesh (Fatima, 2021). Such popularity of these video applications stems from User-generated content (UGC) that enables people the opportunity to create content, share, and establish their own network (Omar & Dequan, 2020).

Like every coin has two sides, social media represents a new interpersonal context that fundamentally reshapes adolescents' social worlds (Nesi *et al.*, 2018), and it is not different in the case of TikTok. Speaking of adolescents' social world, in Bangladesh, TikTok created a controversy terming the trend of this social media "alarming," where the lawyers highlighted the adverse effects of such mobile applications on the younger generations shedding light on the opportunities they provide for criminal activities ("Bangladesh Court Orders Ban on TikTok, PUBG, Free Fire to 'Save Children,'" 2021). As a result, on behalf of the rights organization, Law and Life Foundation, two Supreme Court lawyers petitioned to ban apps like TikTok as the youths were involved in violence and unethical (High Court Directs Govt to Ban PUBG, Free Fire for 3 Months, 2021). The study aims to scrutinize the uses, features, and contents of the TikTok app to understand its role in crime and deviance in society as the challenges that emerge from this app have started scholarly and public interest because of the sophisticated and complicated social media algorithms.

The amenity offered by the TikTok application in making and editing videos creates prospects for cyberbullying and even defamation (Pandela & Riadi, 2020). The lack of regulation in this app impacts the users, who are mainly young people, where they are influenced easily by trends in their community, and as the community has moved from local to global, a more significant possibility for negative influence is probable (Dilon, 2020). Publicness of such app can escalate cyberbullying behaviors, ranging from sharing a video on TikTok to an audience of thousands which then can be shared and accessed, and such availability may increase the likelihood of their being introduced with similar contents that could be triggering or upsetting or amplify the negative consequences of risky or impulsive decision making (Nesi *et al.*, 2018).

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The difference between the idolization of crime offline and online is that social media allows users to not just receive media messages passively but rather re-create and circulate them online to reach out to their idols who may be of criminal kind (O'Connor *et al.*, 2020).

One of the major rationales of this study is to contribute to the literature of cultural criminology as the strength of the 'cultural approach' tackle the subject of crime and criminalization from a variety of new perspectives and academic disciplines (Ferrel, 1999). As the study focuses on Qualitative Content Analysis of Social Media TikTok, it is important to understand TikTok as an element of cultural criminology. Cultural criminology has extended its scope towards the study of films (Rafter, 2006), comic books (Phillips & Strobl, 2013), cops and robbers compilation TV shows (Hayward & Presdee, 2010) etc. and it is time for this study to add TikTok in this field, as cultural criminology of the internet revolves around an explanation of online cultural practices and their role in production and reproduction of transgressive or deviant subculture (Yar, 2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the study of spreading hate on TikTok, Weimann & Masri (2020) have found the algorithmic newsfeed, which is different from other social media as it is not based on who we follow. Authors have found numerous videos promoting hate on TikTok after reviewing videos of far-right material on the "For You" page by content analysis which started recommending similar videos based on the content despite not interacting or following any of these users. Some of the videos featured ISIS fighters with guns, corpses, as well as videos of beheadings with shots glorifying militants set to ISIS songs (Wells, 2019) were found in TikTok. Extremist content like these has been found on TikTok has under the veil of music videos; for example, there have been reportedly using the term "jihad lover," and women calling themselves "jihadist and proud." targeting young girls (Weimann & Masri, 2020). British Sun Online revealed that TikTok is exposing young children and teens to a "cesspit of hate", revealing a series of posts celebrating terrorist killings and promoting Holocaust denials and anti-Jewish conspiracy theories through posts of feature sickening anti-Semitic taunts with cartoons depicting Jewish men with large noses and joking about the Holocaust which has astonishingly hundreds of likes and comments (Wheatstone, 2020). In a study, it is found from interviewing 650 Thai girls and boys of age 16 to 25 that 85 % had had negative experiences with TikTok use where 50 % had been sent nudity and in almost all interviews, 90 %, had been approached with bullying or sexual offers (Dilon, 2020). The rising trend of Social media platforms has been claimed to make people anti-social, claiming when youngsters lose interest in studies, they tend to "show off" through apps like TikTok (Gupta, 2020, as cited in Dilon 2020), thus resulting in them to commit cyberbully. Cyberbullying refers to a crime committed by an individual or a group who wisely use information and communications involving electronic technology to facilitate intentional and repeated harassment or threats against another individual or group by sending or posting cruel, degrading, and insulting texts or graphics using technological means (Mason, 2008). The online pursuit of status may be associated with increased aggressive behavior where some cyberbullying perpetration may be motivated by the desire for status, and the study suggests that cyberbullying is associated with increases in popularity over time (Wegge *et al.*, 2014).

Lately, one of the major risks faced by adolescents online is the risk of each other because of their limited knowledge of the use of technology, lack of privacy, sharing too much personal information online publicly, or posting false information about themselves (Barnes, 2006, as cited in Susanty *et al.*, 2020). This kind of behavior compromises their privacy and may cause potential victimization. One of the biggest threats to young people on social media sites is their digital footprint which refers to the collective and continuous record of a person's Web activity (Dilon, 2020). Western democracies identified this as a threat and focused on the harmful content or online harms mainly based on issues like hate speech, child protection, terrorism propaganda, and copyright infringement (Wang, 2020). The data collected by the TikTok app can create both privacy concerns for individuals and national security risks (Hoffman, 2021). A number of literature explained above has described TikTok about crime, deviance, and probable risks on the users, mostly the young generation. This study will try to add to the literature bringing the class of the content creators of TikTok in relation to crime and deviance, which emanates from the TikTok app in Bangladesh.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

Case Study and Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) has been used to conduct this qualitative study. QCA is the systematic analysis of the contents of TikTok, and the purpose of content analysis in this study is to understand trends of TikTok and its relation to crime and deviance in society. The Case Study of this study analyzes fifteen distinct crime cases from online newspapers and other online sources to identify types of crimes to TikTok. The ontological philosophy of this two-way approach of using Case Study and QCA in this study lies in the attempt to bring out multiple realities that are associated with TikTok. It is believed that the research questions of this study may unfold multidimensional aspects of the problem mentioned, which can be situated as knowledge from the Case Studies and QCA of gathered data.

Sampling Method

Convenience sampling (Kim *et al.*, 2018) is used for the QCA of TikTok according to the specific purposes of answering research questions. Convenience sampling is a method of collecting samples when the unit of analysis is vast, like social media like TikTok and is conveniently located around a location or Internet service (Edgar &

Manz, 2017). Contents of ten Tiktok profiles, 'For you' page of TikTok, which is generated algorithmically to have more access to the contents of the app, along with fifteen crime Case Studies of TikTok related crime from online news media portals like The Daily Prothom Alo, Dhaka Tribune, The New Age, Somoy News, The Daily Star, The Hindustan Times, AP News, AL.com, Daily Journal and from website article of the University of Amsterdam has been analyzed to answer research questions of the study.

Study Findings
Characteristics of TikTok-Related Offenses
Copy-Cat Crime
Copy-cat crime refers to a crime whose occurrence or form is influenced by prior exposure to media content and or live criminal models, and a copy-cat criminal is an individual who commits a crime after being influenced by media content of criminogenic kinds, live models, or a combination of the two. A copy-cat criminal Ashwani Kashyap, was popular as 'TikTok Villain' for his angry videos in TikTok, who killed three people including an air hostess Nitika Sharma he was obsessed with. The perpetrator later killed himself with a gun while fleeing from the police. He was known as 'Johnny Dada' in his TikTok account. He would often post images of actor Shahid Kapoor from the film 'Kabir Singh' which is already a debated movie because it promoted misogynistic toxic masculinity. In one of his videos, he repeated the dialogue from the film: "Jo Mera nahi ho sakta, use Kisi aur ke hone ka mauka nahi doonga (Who is not mine will not be someone else's either)" which depicts copy-cat behavior as it appeared that the character's aggressive beliefs resonated with him (Sandeep Vanga Responds to Kabir Singh-Inspired Tik Tok Star Killing Woman, 2019). According to clinical psychologist Dr. Stanton Samenow these types of crimes strike the public as being 'sick', but these are calculated acts by a mind that can see the impact of its actions (Webster, 1982).

Performance Crimes
The core element of contemporary performance crime is that they are created for distribution through social media, which involves both willing and unwilling performers (Surrette, 2015). Trendy TikTok challenges that require performing or acting or carrying out an activity and then posting it publicly on their account sometimes lead to criminal offences. For example, a student of south Alabama high school faced criminal charges after being accused of stealing a fire extinguisher from the school as part of a TikTok challenge 'devious lick' which had been widely spread on social media (Alabama Student Arrested as Part of TikTok Crime Challenge, 2021). With the viral trend, more cases like this begin to appear in the criminal justice system, for instance, two students from Evans Middle School were charged with that same challenge on TikTok. Baldwin County students have been charged with theft for the same challenge. In contrast, the other

is charged with criminal trespassing and interference with government property (hkoplowitz @al.com, 2021). Anything redirecting hashtags of #deviouslick or other phrases associated with the challenge has been removed by TikTok authority to help stop its spread after such events. Another example of such events occurred in China where a man surnamed Guo was arrested and charged with stealing dozens of Mercedes-Benz car badges in Yongkang in Zhejiang Province in an apparent attempt to gain more thumbs-up on his TikTok profile in 2018 ("Man Steals Mercedes-Benz Car Badges to Gain Fame Online," 2018). This 25-year-old man confessed that he had been recently obsessed with TikTok. He committed the crime to get attention which he eventually did by garnering hundreds of thousands of likes in his content which consisted of him stealing logos. In this short span of video, people often cross their limits by violating laws to gain attention from strangers.

Fame Driven Crime
Zachary T. Latham was an 18-year-old accused of stabbing William T. "Timmy" Durham, a 51-year-old correctional officer. For over two years, Durham was chronically targeted and harassed by Latham, took videos of their disputes, and posted on TikTok for more user engagement. Latham was seen posting videos on April 23, posing with a gun, telling the camera, "That is how you handle neighbors," though the footage of the encounter has been taken down after the case broke in media. In other videos of TikTok from his account, Latham even threatened to document the family and reveal their home address where commenters allegedly encouraged Latham's criminal activities. One user even suggested Latham to "go after" Durham's wife, Catherine (Smith, 2020). This case is different from copy-cat crime behavior and performance crime in a sense because neither the perpetrator imitated any prior idols for his crime, nor did he follow a challenge for more likes. He posted his criminal activity, abusing neighbors only to get fame in his way of showing off machoism.

True Crime Culture in TikTok
True crime in TikTok is a trend that allows users to make content with true crime stories. True crime videos are not exclusive of make-up tutorial videos, or recipe videos where the content creator narrates true crime stories while doing their job. It also includes various short clips of crime news, their amateur investigation, and sometimes fabrication that seem innocent. Still, it has been subject to growing criticism as it violates the privacy of the victims. When searched #truecrime in TikTok, it included numerous uncountable user IDs naming and indicating true crime stories, and hashtags in different titles. This seems just a social media genre and may have a deeper and far-reaching impact on the criminal case itself. TikTok turned a severe case of Gabby Petito into a true-crime trendy entertainment with the #GabbyPetito hashtag amassing over 874 million views within just 12

days of the influencer being reported missing (Aguilar *et al.*, 2021). They key findings from true crime content can be categorized as a) Amateur online investigations by content creators, b) Promoting digital vigilantism, c) Violating privacy of victims, d) Spreading misinformation, and e) Glorifying criminal fandoms which poses serious threat to criminal investigation process.

TikTok and its Relation to Crime and Deviance in Bangladesh

With the growing number of users from Bangladesh, it is undeniable that it has already shown the media's dark side. From case studies, and content of the TikTok app itself, the study found crime and deviance occurrence in two ways; online and offline. Though these two ways cannot be entirely distinguished from one another, as the boundaries of crime committed in TikTok overlap, the study attempts to categories them in two segments to have a clear view of the offences.

Crimes Committed Online

Crimes that are committed online are primarily found in the app in the form of video content, comments of the users and descriptions of the video.

Hate Content and Hate Comment

Hate speech is any speech directed against a particular group originated from prejudice. Hate speech against females is evident in the content of TikTok for example, there are thousands of misogynistic comments of Bangladeshi users in content of Bangladeshi actresses, in profiles of popular female TikTok celebrities, or any female users of TikTok. There are thousands of contents where females are portrayed as unfaithful where numerous people hate comment on how females are the sole reason of social degradation. There are comments of victim-blaming for rape, sexual assault and molestation dehumanizing the character of a woman.

Cyberbullying

Disrespectful and sexually abusive comments are part and parcel of any public post of female users. These bullying comments vary from sexist remarks on gender roles, body-shaming describing parts of female bodies to abusive remarks derived from sexual frustration, consisting of a huge portion of these contents.

Crimes Committed Offline

Offline crimes are the traditional crimes that are committed outside the space of TikTok, but the social media is used for victim selection or as a medium to show off the crime.

Human Trafficking

One of the most striking news of TikTok related crime is human trafficking which took place recently in Bangladesh. A transnational gang involving India, Dubai, UAE and some other countries in the Middle East and some Bangladeshis is behind trafficking young girls using Tiktok and forcing them into prostitution in India where the gang luring young women in the name of providing well-paid jobs in India they first add their targets to specific Facebook groups of TikTok users and later traffic them. Around seven hundred TikTok users recently took part in a social event last year in Dhaka organized by "TikTok Babu", one of those arrested in India. During their stay in India, the victims were tortured inhumanly, sexually assaulted, photographed and recorded by the culprits to blackmail the victims, threatening to send the photos and videos to their families or leak those on social media, in case the victims try to escape and later they were forced into prostitution in India ("Transnational Gang behind Trafficking Young Bangladeshi TikTok Users, Says Police," 2021).

Rape

A number of rape cases have been filed against men accused of rape where all the perpetrators lured young women into believing they can make them TikTok stars. A group of young men took a 13-year-old minor girl, tempting her to make her a "TikTok star", and then gang-raped her ("Teenager Tiktok Girl 'Gang-Raped' by Fellow Video Makers," 2020). Another case from September 2021, states that a commercial was presented for producing TikTok Star, which led to trapping and raping the young girls. The culprit is a "serial rapist," whose rape pattern involves trapping young girls who are all under eighteen, promising them to make them TikTok celebrities. He had raped five minor girls until now and used TikTok as the media to fish his victims (Zahid, 2021). In both cases, TikTok was used as a medium to reach to the victims of rape by perpetrators, where the victims aspired to be TikTok stars.

Sexual Harassment

Two teenagers who are students of class eight at the same school allegedly sexually harassed their female classmate in Barguna's Pathorghata Upazila and spread the video on "TikTok". A case was filed in this regard on Saturday accusing the two teenagers. The boy used to harass the victim on the streets for a long time, and on the day of the incident after the school ended, one of them sexually assaulted her and another one secretly videotaped the incident and later spread it on TikTok. The victim threatened to commit suicide in fear of public shaming as the video was kept moving in TikTok ("Case Filed against 2 Teenagers for Harassing Classmate, Spreading Video on Social Media," 2021).

Fraudulence

A youth named as "TikTok Raj" in TikTok, a 26 years old adult was arrested, along with a Rab uniform, fake ID card, on the charge of deceiving over 100 women posing as a member of different forces, including Rab, on TikTok (Zahid, 2021). He was a garment factory worker and studied up to SSC. He is currently a security

guard of a hotel in Bogura who used the fake identity of law enforcers on TikTok, befriended women, formed relationships, and subsequently blackmailed with private photos. He married four women using his fake identity. He accumulated around 2M views and numerous followers in TikTok, where he produced content featuring the daily life of force members and manipulated photos to show his participation in events of the forces. He has been using this fake identity, deceiving people, and fraud for around two years.

Abduction

There is a group consisting of at least eight members, all aged between 20 and 22 where two of the group members live in Saudi Arabia, who lure young women promising them to make them TikTok celebrities establishing cordial relationships with school-going girls and misguide them with proposals for love affairs. For this purpose, a 15-year-old girl went missing after leaving her Kafrul residence to go to her school on September 12, 2021 ("Girl, Abducted by Group She Met on TikTok, Rescued by Rab," 2021). The gang members tricked her into going into a house in Norda area that day and later took her to Gafargaon in Mymensingh. This was not a human trafficking gang but rather a small criminal hub that targeted young women to victimize. One of the offenders worked as a driver at a private firm, one was an employee of a private firm and another was an employee of a barbershop.

Murder

A young man of 23 years old, allegedly killed his wife who was 19 years old, in Bagerhat over posting "offensive" photos on TikTok and later surrendered in the local police station ("Man Surrenders to Police after Killing Wife over TikTok Posts," 2021). The wife had several accounts on social media including TikTok and Likee apps where she used to post pictures from those accounts.

Vandalism and Rowdyism

TikTok video maker Yasin Arafat Opu, 20 years old adult, popularly known as "Opu Bhai" on TikTok, along with 20-25 others were accused in the charges for unlawful assembly, unjustly obstructing work, assaulting and causing injuries to the plaintiff and also stealing goods in Uttara area of the capital. He, along with his accomplice, a 21 years old adult was arrested from the scene of the crime. After applying for a three-day remand by the police, the court sent the duo to jail. Yasin Arafat Opu is famous for his unusual hairstyle, signature catchphrases, and gestures on his TikTok. The power of this fan base can be easily understood as when asked, why they were beating the plaintiffs, they replied: "We run the whole Bangladesh. In just five minutes, 500 people will join us. Tell your father that we beat you…" ("Popular TikTok Video Maker 'Opu Bhai' Arrested, Sent to Jail," 2020). Another case of rowdyism is that five youths in Bogura were arrested on the charge of making a TikTok video humiliating the national emblem where that TikTok video showed that the youths were singing a Hindi song in front of a Shaheed Minar at a school in Bogura which immediately caused a nuisance in the social media ("5 TikTok Youths Held for Insulting Nat'l Emblem," 2021). Disrespecting National Emblem is considered a criminal offence and under Bangladesh National Anthem, Flag and Emblem Order, 1972, and the incident would be taken against the arrested youth as a crime. Nonetheless, this act can fall under Digital Security Act for the penalties of insult too.

DISCUSSION

The study's findings focus on four research questions: the major features of TikTok and how it attracts the young generation, and how TikTok's contents relate to deviance and crime in society. Following these two generic questions, the perspective of Bangladesh arises by finding the major features of crime and deviance emanating from TikTok in Bangladesh. This section of the study will evaluate the answers concerning the theoretical contexts of the study.

Let us begin by answering Schroeder's (2017) question if social media shapes our world. In TikTok, users perform in front of a global audience, who come into play by motivating, influencing, and directing the content of the performers becoming active in the setting, and the performers (users) make content accordingly to the satisfaction of their audience. With the global reach, greater differentiation is created because of the exposition of the culture of different parts of the world through social media, it becomes multidimensional and more complex. As Castells says, the advancement of technology has always been evident in history, so culture does not change wholly by the influence of the advent of social media in different parts of the world. It is evident in the findings of the study with the difference in crime types, and characteristics of offences that emerge from TikTok in relation to the West and Bangladesh. Multidimensional content creates space for greater involvement of performers and audience, which is the users of TikTok. The findings of the study direct to this theory that, crimes like performance crimes, copycat crimes, and fame-driven crimes are all attention-seeking activities to increase the reach of their content so that they can gain more likes. With the open market of globalization, more content means a source of money. In Bangladesh, the scenario of cringe content to gain more likes can be an example. With globalization and easy access to social media, the dynamics of culture are changed according to the already existing cultural norms. A new popular culture of going with the trend, accepting hashtag challenges, and executing it has become a new culture of social media TikTok. Considering the cultural criminological explanation of TikTok content results in the exploration of subcultures related to illicit and illegal practices in social media, where communities are born online with shared cultural orientations that are often subject to marginalization or 'deviant'. Such deviant

activity is a hashtag challenge named 'Devious lick', which took many young school-going students to police custody. The challenge required students to steal school property and lick the toilet seat of public washrooms. Some people carried out challenges like stealing car logos in China. When a trend is started, a community is created with a hashtag, and numerous of such deviant videos are uploaded to gain followers and likes. Due to cultural differences, a trend in a country may not affect similarly in other countries. Trends that lead to deviance, are culturally controlled, but not non-existent.

The study findings support Social Impact Theory (SIT) by Latané (1981). The case of Opu bhai is the manifestation of this theory as the followers of Opu bhai here can be explained figuratively with light bulbs and the intensity, closeness, and number of bulbs (followers) impact the experience of Opu bhai. The more impact, the higher the status of Opu bhai is, and the more power is given to him. The acceptance of criminal fandom depicts a new mode of publicity, 'no publicity is bad publicity' which is the current guiding rule for many individuals who pursue criminal infamy as a substitute for unattainable law-abiding fame. Here comes the theory of anomie, which explains that when most people strive to achieve culturally recognized goals but their means to reach that goal is limited, they may take the path of innovation, rebellion, or retreat rather than ritualism or conforming to society's given means. Albert Cohen's status frustration arises among the users of TikTok when they aspire to many followers and online status but have limited access to reach their desired status, they do not conform to lawful means, and take deviant content to reach their goal of online fame. Consequences are the rise in performance crime, copycat crime, and fame-driven crimes.

The first limitation of the study is the method used for conducting this study. Due to the algorithmic structure of the app, Qualitative Content Analysis could not capture manually a significant number of content due to the limited period. To include more videos in the study, a quantitative approach is recommended. As the biases of the researcher play a significant role in interpreting content, another limitation lies in the bias of interpretation of the content. TikTok is comparatively a new emerging popular social media, and much literature on deviance and crime related to TikTok is inadequate.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study neither lies in establishing TikTok as the greatest threat for the young generation nor supports banning this social media as a control method. TikTok is a huge community that can bring significant positive change in entertainment, economy, business, and even in education. The purpose of the study is to determine the characteristics of the crime and deviance overviewing the app, identify which class, and group of people is in more danger of committing crimes in TikTok and who can be the potential victims of that crime in Bangladesh, so that it becomes easier for the Criminal

Justice System to enforce control method to combat those crimes. With this pace of globalization, TikTok has become a popular culture, and it will have an impact on the generation evidently. The study attempted to explain the impact through a cultural criminological lens and pave the way for future research on the problem.

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