

Shooting stars: TikTok's explosive and rocky ride to fame

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India accounts for 40 percent of TikTok's 800 million users worldwide

He's no Bollywood star, but school dropout Israil Ansari has found fast fame on TikTok with two million followers glued to his oddball dancing and rainbow hairstyles in India, the app's biggest international market.

Thanks to the addictive and controversial Chinese-made platform, the gangly 20-year-old can now barely walk down the street without teenagers flocking to him for autographs.

"I get extremely excited watching people react to my videos on TikTok," Ansari told AFP in Mumbai, saying he tries to produce clips that make people happy, "be it with a peppy song or comedy videos".

"In a land of 1.3 billion people, grabbing popularity is not easy."

Launched by Chinese company ByteDance in September 2017, TikTok's playfulness and off-the-cuff humour—users post short clips of themselves performing skits, lip-syncing and dancing—has turned out to be its trump card.

Last week the app hit 1.5 billion downloads worldwide, outperforming Instagram, which is better known for polished selfies than goofy memes.

Anyone armed with a smartphone—whether a suburban US teen or an Indian slum-dweller—can use TikTok to tell their own story in under 60 seconds, experts say, winning viewers, likes, shares and eventually, the elusive goal of stardom.

"TikTok videos work because they are raw, making them more relatable for youngsters, who love receiving feedback and sometimes earn money from the app, depending on their popularity," Meenakshi Tiwari, an analyst at the US firm Forrester Research, told AFP.

A sophisticated AI system enables the app to detect its users' tastes and point them to videos that keep them hooked for hours on end.



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Pornography and politics

"India is the main market for TikTok followed by China, the United States, Indonesia, and Vietnam," Craig Chapple from San Francisco-based research agency Sensor Tower told AFP.

The South Asian nation accounts for 40 percent of TikTok's 800 million users worldwide and 11 of the top 25 stars on the app are based in India.

That includes Ansari, who earns commissions for partnering with brands to promote their products, earning anywhere between 20,000 rupees (\$280) to 50,000 rupees in a month.

In China, where the app is called Douyin, viewers can purchase everything from face cream to clothing by tapping on videos created by influencers.

But it hasn't been all fun and games—the app has come under fire around the world over claims that it was encouraging the spread of child pornography.

Bangladesh has banned it as part of a clampdown on porn, while Indonesia briefly blocked access over blasphemy concerns.

TikTok has also been hit with an enormous fine in the United States for illegally collecting information from children.



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In India, the app has often run into controversy, hitting the headlines in April after a teenager was accidentally shot dead by his friend in Delhi as they filmed a video featuring a pistol.

Days later, an Indian court momentarily cut access to TikTok over paedophilia concerns.

Privacy fears

In addition to fears that the app could be used to promote pornographic content, political sensitivities have also surfaced as a flashpoint.

Its Chinese origins have sparked concerns about the app serving as a soft power arm of Beijing, with TikTok facing a national security investigation in the United States to probe whether it is sending data to China.

In July, the app suspended the accounts of some of its biggest Indian stars after the four men—all Muslims—posted videos criticising the lynching of a Muslim youth by a Hindu mob.

The restrictions were later lifted but many believed the app's creators had succumbed to pressure from Hindu nationalists after a right-wing

lawmaker from a regional party filed a case against the four TikTok influencers.



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Despite the scandals, the appetite for TikTok shows no sign of easing.

"From morning to late in the night, I only watch TikTok videos," 22-year-old Azeez Ahmed Siddiqui told AFP.

"My family thrashes me for not having a job and wasting my time on TikTok. But I really want to become a star," he said.

With 3,500 followers, the road to TikTok superstardom seems a difficult one but the Mumbai-based Siddique is unfazed.

"I know a lot of people who had no careers and now are famous because of TikTok.

"If they can achieve this, then why can't I?"

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