

Platform Values and Strategic Positioning: An Analysis of TikTok's Community Guidelines and Public Communications in 2018-2024

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Abstract

As large digital platforms are criticized for lacking accountability to lawmakers, stakeholders, and publics, their discourse on values has become a strategic positioning to showcase their fidelity to the public good. The Chinese short-video platform TikTok, which has proved both popular and controversial since its emergence in 2018, serves as an example of how platforms employ values to respond to external demands. Drawing from positioning theory and research on platform values, this article conducts an analysis of TikTok's community guidelines and public communications from 2018 to 2024. Our findings are organized around three discourses that depict the development of TikTok's strategic positioning, its justification for content moderation, and emphasis on its global position as a strategic choice to counter external regulatory threats.

Keywords: platform values; platform accountability; TikTok; platform governance; discourse analysis

Introduction

Since its rise to prominence in 2018, the Chinese short-video platform TikTok has been at the center of several controversies relating to data security, privacy, and harmful content, among other issues. A series of governmental actions against the platform, including bans and partial bans, has raised pressing questions about the platform's values and its legitimacy in the eyes of policymakers and the public. This article analyzes the strategic positioning of values in TikTok's community guidelines and public communications. It aims to understand how TikTok discursively constructs a sense of accountability in its public-facing communications.

TikTok's rapid rise is coupled with geopolitical controversies of its overseas operations (Gray, 2021). The platform has faced bans or partial bans in several countries due to concerns about Chinese espionage, data harvesting, harmful content, and misinformation (Forristal, 2025). These controversies have seriously tarnished TikTok's reputation, requiring it to justify its governance practices and convince the Western public and stakeholders of its adherence to democratic values and the public interest.

Community guidelines and public communications are crucial sites for platforms to communicate their governance approaches and practices while maintaining a particular position across different domains. They reflect underlying principles that guide their judgments and justify their policy decisions (Scharlach et al., 2023, p. 3). Moreover, as platform companies face pressures and accountability demands, they use values as discursive tools to present themselves as accountable to policymakers, advertisers, and the public (e.g., Gillespie, 2018a).

Previous research on social media platform policies has studied the norms and values embedded in these policies under the notion of “platform values” (Chan et al., 2023; Hallinan et al., 2022; Leurs & Zimmer, 2017; Scharlach et al., 2023). Such studies demonstrate how platforms strategically emphasize values that align with their needs to reconcile conflicting commercial and public interests. Drawing on positioning theory (James, 2014; Moghaddam & Harré, 2010), we view platform values as part of the platform’s discursively constructed, strategic positioning. We focus on TikTok due to the growing attention to controversies concerning the platform, including safety issues, harmful content, and geopolitical controversies, making it an interesting case for studying the strategic positioning of platform companies.

We attempt to answer the following research question:

How has TikTok strategically positioned itself in public communications from 2018 to 2024 to construct a sense of accountability?

Combining critical discourse analysis with positioning theory (e.g., James & Wise, 2025; Wise & James, 2013), we examined the historical versions of TikTok’s community guidelines and news releases from 2018 to 2024. In the following, we first review the relevant literature on organizational strategic positioning and platform values, followed by an explanation of the methods and data used in our analysis. Our findings are structured around three discourses: The first discourse emphasizes TikTok’s aspiration to build a community of creativity, expression, and joy. The second discourse focuses on TikTok’s positioning as a safety-first, transparent, and trustworthy platform through strategically invoking expert partnerships and voluntary information disclosure. The third discourse, which positions the platform as a global actor that aligns with international human rights, can be seen as a response to the growing geopolitical scrutiny and threats of shutdown particularly in the United States. Finally, we discuss how these discourses reflect strategic ambiguity that allows the platform to navigate contradictory social expectations.

Platform Values and Strategic Positioning

Organizations use public communications to build legitimacy, identity, and a positive image, often with publicly articulated values (Breeze, 2013). These communications can be seen as efforts of organizations’ strategic positioning for public relations – the discursive construction of a representation aimed at achieving an intended outcome, from which organizational actions are enabled or constrained in relation to the local moral order where the organization’s public relations activity takes place (James, 2014, p. 19). Strategic positioning in organizational public relations is seen as a discursive struggle – a “bargaining dialogue” where positioning is a dynamic process that involves active negotiations with various parties (James, 2014, p. 24).

Through strategic positioning, an organization attributes itself to specific values, qualities, or characteristics that align with public and stakeholder expectations, assigning rights and duties accordingly (James, 2014, p. 40; Moghaddam & Harré, 2010). This intentional positioning is maintained through “giving accounts” – providing explanations, narratives, or justifications – and continuously supported through discursive repertoire, such as stories and narratives, to shape audience perceptions of reality (James, 2014, pp. 87–89, 123). We understand accountability as a social relation that can be discursively constructed through an organization’s strategic positioning, in which actors are obliged to explain or justify their actions (Bovens, 2007; Weizman & Fetzer, 2021)

As powerful actors in governing online spaces, platform companies strategically position themselves and their governance practices in relation to publics and various stakeholders, with the goal of shielding themselves from political and regulatory pressures and maintaining their appeal to users. Historically positioned as “intermediaries” exempt from legal liabilities (Gillespie, 2018b), platform companies have increasingly sought to legitimize their growing power amid public scrutiny and state interventions (Abiri & Guidi, 2023; Gorwa, 2024). To achieve that, platform companies have developed distinct discursive strategies in their public communications to secure themselves in regulatory and public debates, such as positioning themselves as technology companies rather than media companies (Gillespie, 2010; Napoli & Caplan, 2017), framing themselves as “vectors of progress” and state regulations as “outdated” (Yates, 2020), and employing image repair strategies when engaging in external criticisms (Lien et al., 2022). Politically, platform companies have positioned themselves as “civil society actors” through “grassroots lobbying” tactics to gain public support and influence public policy about platform businesses (see Yates, 2020); and aligned themselves with the state by emulating structures of legal institutions in order to legitimize their self-governance and content moderation practices (Abiri & Guidi, 2023).

Building on platforms’ contested position of neutrality (e.g., Chander & Krishnamurthy, 2018), recent research has increasingly focused on the concept of platform values – sets of articulated values that platform companies attribute to their policies and governance practices (Hallinan et al., 2022; Leurs & Zimmer, 2017; Zingales & Belli, 2020). Studies have shown that values in platforms’ policies and public communications serve as a multi-purpose discursive device to support the libertarian ideals and anti-regulation (Maddox & Malson, 2020), legitimize and justify platform self-regulations (Gillespie, 2018a), and navigate conflicting stakeholder interests (Scharlach et al., 2023). Platforms’ value discourses are often flexible and performative (Chan et al., 2023; Gillespie, 2018a), and change as platform companies face external criticisms and pressures (Barrett & Kreiss, 2019; Chan et al., 2023).

On researching platform values and positioning, platforms’ policy documents and public communication materials are key sites for understanding platform companies’ discursive construction of reality (Chan et al., 2023; Gillespie, 2018a; Gillett et al., 2022; Hallinan et al., 2022; Maddox & Malson, 2020; Scharlach et al., 2023). Platforms’ policy documents have been understood as “boundary objects” that are adaptable to different needs while maintaining a specific identity (Scharlach et al., 2023, p. 4). Platforms’ community guidelines, specifically, serve as hybrid policy texts that articulate a platform’s value aspirations, evolve over time, and justify self-regulation while maintaining commercial appeal (Gillespie, 2018a, pp. 47–66). Platforms’ public communications – such as reports, statements, and company news releases – reveal how platforms present and legitimize their actions to the public, particularly regarding their involvement in societal issues (Gillett et al., 2022).

Method and Data: TikTok's Community Guidelines and Public Communications

In this study, we analyzed TikTok's strategic positioning in the platform's community guidelines and news releases from August 2018 to December 2024. We understand discourse as the institutionalized use of language, texts, and communicative practices to construct and communicate subject positions and social reality (Cameron & Panović, 2014; Davies & Harré, 1990; Fairclough, 2013). We combined critical discourse analysis (CDA) with positioning theory for our analytical approach. CDA focuses on the role of language played in constructing and maintaining social reality and power asymmetries (Wodak & Koller, 2008). For this reason, CDA aids in revealing the ways in which organizations construct positive self-image and wield power over public perception (Jaworska, 2020; Wodak & Koller, 2008). Positioning theory complements CDA by providing an effective framework to analyze contested discourse sites where an organization "attempts to manage meanings in all kinds of interactions with internal and external stakeholders and other social actors" (James & Wise, 2025, p. 370).

For data collection, we used the Internet Archive Wayback Machine (<https://web.archive.org/>) to inspect the TikTok community guidelines page (<https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/>) and capture snapshots retroactively at a thirty-day interval starting from December 2024. By comparing these snapshots, we identified thirteen versions of TikTok's community guidelines, published between 2018 and 2024. We also collected news releases from the platform's official news channel (TikTok Newsroom), focusing on content targeting the United States (<https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us>) and the European Union market (<https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-eu/>), as both regions have significantly influenced TikTok's policy development and public relations. Our initial dataset included 1,017 posts (US - 907, EU - 110) published between August 2018 and December 2024. After excluding posts unrelated to our focus, such as marketing content and celebrity endorsements, we retained 309 documents for our analysis (N=309).

We coded the data inductively, focusing on how TikTok communicates its values related to its users/community, content moderation, and platform self-governance. We first identified key value discourse and notable shifts across historical versions of the community guidelines. We then examined how these shifts were framed and contextualized in the platform's news releases on governance practices. Adopting a longitudinal perspective, we also considered how external stakeholders may have influenced these changes. For this study, this mainly involves *state-driven regulatory pressures and threats* that TikTok has responded to in the United States and the European Union since 2020, fueled by various societal concerns about the platform.

Results

Building a community of creativity and joy

TikTok's self-positioning is encapsulated in its community guidelines as an opening statement, where it outlines the platform's core mission, beliefs, and expectations for users, the values it upholds, and the expectations for users. From 2018 to 2019, TikTok's mission revolves around the character of "creativity" and "expression" ("TikTok is a place for your creativity and expression") (TikTok, 2018), reflecting the platform's transformation from its predecessor Musical.ly – a video-recording app – into a short video platform focusing on social networking (see Brennan, 2020). The notion of creativity aligns with the Web

2.0 narrative of everyday creativity and self-expression empowered by video-sharing sites (Burgess, 2006, 2015; Burgess & Green, 2009; Strangelove, 2010). By encouraging ordinary users to become active content producers (Kaye et al., 2021), TikTok positions itself as a platform that serves the democratic appeal of empowering non-elite and marginalized populations (Lin & de Kloet, 2019; Mazumdar, 2022).

Since 2020, TikTok has explicitly connected creativity with joy in its slogan – “inspire creativity and bring joy” – projecting a carefree and positive image in the platform market that insulated it from political controversies (Banjo & Bloomberg, 2020; Scharlach, 2024). Unlike US-based platforms which often position themselves as “marketplaces of ideas” emphasizing free speech (see Maddox & Malson, 2020), TikTok positions itself as a platform for self-expression and online entertainment enabled by short videos (see Sherman, 2022). This value attribution also functions as a form of soft governance (see Scharlach, 2024) – by linking creativity to *safety, diversity, inclusion, and authenticity*, the platform embeds normative expectations into its guidelines:

At TikTok, we prioritize safety, diversity, inclusion, and authenticity. We encourage creators to celebrate what makes them unique and viewers to engage with what inspires them; we believe that a safe environment helps everyone do so openly. We prize the global nature of our community and strive to take into account the breadth of cultural norms where we operate. We also aim to cultivate an environment for genuine interactions by encouraging authentic content on TikTok (TikTok, 2022a).

As such, the platform enacted a position of *an ethical governor/rule-setter* that aligns with the “local moral order (Moghaddam & Harré, 2010)” of digital platforms – where platform companies are assigned or refused a cluster of rights and duties shaped by the broader discourse of platform governance (e.g., Haapoja et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2023). Creativity and self-expression become *a composite ideal*, grounded in other values which serve as governing principles (see Scharlach et al., 2023) – “feeling safe is essential to helping people feel comfortable with expressing themselves openly and creatively” (TikTok, 2020a). Like other major platforms, this type of value-laden language aims to build legitimacy, maximize user appeal, and guide user behavior (Gillett et al., 2022; Hallinan et al., 2022; Kaye et al., 2021; Scharlach et al., 2023).

Moreover, as controversies and regulatory pressures intensified – especially in the United States and the EU – TikTok’s positioning evolved toward what James (2014) calls “forced self-positioning” (p.62). For instance, TikTok began to frame *safety* as its “top priority” in 2020 (“Offering a safe and supportive environment is our top priority”) as a response to the growing concerns and scrutiny in 2019 (e.g., Jennings, 2019), and increasingly aligned itself with international legal and ethical frameworks in 2023 when the platform is under U.S. government’s demand for divestiture (see Fung, 2023). By referencing input from external advisory bodies (user community, safety and public health experts, and regional advisory councils) and legal instruments (e.g., the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights), TikTok constructs a *consultative, globally responsible* image:

[The guidelines] are informed by international legal frameworks, industry best practices, and input from our community, safety and public health experts, and our regional Advisory Councils. ... Our content moderation principles and practices are informed by the UN Guiding Principles on Business

and Human Rights and the Santa Clara Principles, and we seek to align with international legal frameworks, such as the International Bill of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of Children (TikTok, 2023a).

As an implicit, deliberate positioning of other, TikTok's community guidelines subtly position users as *co-guardians* of platform values, assigning them the role of maintaining the platform's positive online environment by discouraging engagement with borderline content (Chan et al., 2023, p. 20) – content that is undesirable for the platform but does not breach the platform's terms of service (see Gillett et al., 2022). For instance, in its description of the content recommendation algorithm (a key determinant of content visibility), TikTok positions its algorithm-curated For You Feed as *all-age appropriate*:

Our recommendation system is designed with user safety as a primary consideration, meaning that some content may not be eligible for recommendation. While the spontaneity of the FYF is what makes TikTok unique, the FYF is intended for a general audience that includes everyone from our teenage users to great grandparents.

We consider the breadth of our audience when we determine what content is eligible for algorithmic promotion on the platform. Provided that it does not violate local laws, the following types of content may be allowed on our platform, searchable, and viewed in Following feeds but not eligible for recommendation (TikTok, 2022a).

As such, the platform distinguishes what contents are *permitted* and *promoted* by deploying visibility moderation which downranks borderline content (Zeng & Kaye, 2022), facilitating a gatekeeping role in the creator economy wherein it wields power over content visibility and monetization (see Bleier et al., 2024). For users, this means that they are subject to the threat of invisibility benchmarked by the platform's additional standards/requirements for content to qualify for algorithmic promotion, therefore reinforcing power asymmetries between the platform and users (Bucher, 2012; Cotter, 2019; Zeng & Kaye, 2022).

Keep the community safe

Beyond value discourse in its policy texts, TikTok enacts its strategic positioning through its ongoing governance practices, which are communicated via the platform's news releases. By 2020, TikTok began to frame safety as a foundational principle both in its community guidelines and news releases – emphasized through recurring expressions such as “keeping our community safe” – in response to mounting criticisms and regulatory pressures in the United States, as news reports highlighted concerns over child privacy violations (Pham, 2019), data practices (Rummler, 2020), and national security (e.g., Harwell & Romm, 2019; Hern, 2019). This emphasis marked a discursive shift from a carefree, light-hearted platform image toward one that actively signals platform responsibility and accountability. This shift is visible in a statement on the platform's settlement with the Federal Trade Commission back in 2019:

We care deeply about the safety and privacy of our users. This is an ongoing commitment, and we are continuing to expand and evolve our protective measures in support of this (TikTok, 2019a).

Platforms often adopt subjective, ambiguous, yet flexible definitions of safety to fit their needs (DeCook et al., 2022; Gillespie, 2018a; Gillett et al., 2022; Schwinges et al., 2023). As such, TikTok positions safety as a *transforming problem* that requires adaptive and comprehensive measures:

Our online safety strategy has multiple aspects. We enforce our Community Guidelines using both technology and thousands of experts around the world. We develop pioneering safety policies and features, and we partner with external safety experts to keep abreast of complex and constantly evolving challenges (TikTok, 2021b).

By framing safety issues as “constantly evolving,” TikTok's positions its governance approach as *proactive* and is linked to “policies, practices, products, people and partners” (TikTok, 2020b). A key aspect of this proactivity is invoking *borrowed legitimacy* (Mattingly & Westover, 2015) through expanding collaboration with “outside safety experts,” including fact-checkers, digital literacy organizations, and NGOs (TikTok, 2024b), aiming to legitimize different areas of TikTok's governance. For example, as a platform with a significantly younger user base, TikTok has actively emphasized its support for youth and families through a series of collaboration initiatives with NGOs that focus on the online safety of young people, such as Internet Matters (TikTok, 2019b), The Family Online Safety Institute (TikTok, 2019c), and the WeProtect Global Alliance (TikTok, 2020c).

In parallel, TikTok's discourse on platform transparency and accountability revolves around *building trust with its community and stakeholders* across multiple news releases. By positioning public trust as “must be earned” rather than “taken for granted,” the platform positions itself as a *morally accountable* company striving to cultivate long-term public trust through consistent actions:

We work to earn and maintain trust through ongoing transparency into the actions we take to safeguard our platform, because we know that just saying “trust us” is not enough. That's why

long ago we made an important commitment to transparency, particularly when it comes to how we moderate and recommend content (TikTok, 2022b).

Despite such claims, platforms like TikTok operate as opaque “black boxes” where outsiders lack access to inner operations and cannot independently verify activities such as content moderation and algorithm recommendations (Gorwa, 2019; Nielsen et al., 2022). In this context of power and information asymmetry, TikTok’s notion of transparency is strategically positioned as a *symbolic substitute* for platform accountability relying on voluntary information disclosures. Here, trust serves as a discursive tool to compensate for the opacity of the platform’s inner operations, maintaining asymmetrical control while presenting the platform as accountable. Similarly, TikTok has signaled its commitment to public accountability through *voluntary, non-binding* agreements with EU institutions, such as the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation and Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online (TikTok, 2020g, 2020h).

By contrast, when platform accountability is imposed by *externally mandated, legally binding regulation* (e.g., Heidebrecht, 2024), platforms often react defensively due to compliance burdens that may threaten their profit-making (Gorwa, 2024, p. 60). TikTok’s response to the EU’s Digital Service Act (DSA) and Digital Market Act (DMA) illustrates an ambivalent position, expressing nominal support while raising concerns about regulatory overreach:

[W]e welcome the EU’s Digital Services Act, and support its overall ambition. . . . We believe that there are a number of dynamic approaches that platforms can take to improve both transparency and accountability. This is important to consider as the DSA outlines check-lists of data to be provided to different parties, some of which may be of questionable value, could contravene commercial trade secrets or even undermine safety efforts if placed in the wrong hands (TikTok, 2021a).

Today, we are appealing the European Commission's decision to designate TikTok a 'gatekeeper' under the new Digital Markets Act (DMA) legislation. We fully support the principles of the DMA, which aims to better enable challengers to compete with incumbent players. (...) The designation decision is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of our business and threatens our ability to grow and compete with true gatekeepers - put simply, it risks protecting the very monopolies that the law intended to open up (TikTok, 2023c).

In these statements, TikTok adopts a dual positioning strategy: On one hand, it positions itself as a *cooperative actor* that endorses the principles of regulation (“support its overall ambition”, “We fully support”). On the other hand, regulation is described as *intrusive* and *misguiding*, undermining the platform’s private interests, and counterproductive to the platform’s regulatory mission (“questionable value” “contravene” “undermine” “misunderstanding” “threaten,” “risks”). This strategy exemplifies the performative, flexible yet selective nature of platform company discourse wherein it actively redefines the meanings and boundaries of platform values to align with its strategic objective.

TikTok in the face of geopolitical scrutiny

As TikTok expands globally, the platform's positioning increasingly responds to the growing geopolitical scrutiny, particularly from the United States. Since 2020, the platform has faced serious legitimacy challenges marked by looming bans or enacted bans across multiple regions (e.g., Euronews, 2025), pushing it into a crisis immersed in geopolitical tensions (Gray, 2021). In such situations, TikTok has strategically maneuvered its position as a "global actor" to counter the intensifying regulatory threats from the state through framing itself as a victim of political antagonism. A central strategy is the deployment of "David and Goliath" storyline (e.g., Gatchet & Cloud, 2013), where TikTok positions itself as "an oppressed business" being targeted by the more powerful, dominant state government occupied with *political fear*, as shown in the platform's public statements on the U.S. ban:

The text of the decision makes it plain that there has been a reliance on unnamed "reports" with no citations, fears that app "may be" used for misinformation campaigns with no substantiation of such fears, and concerns about the collection of data that is industry standard for thousands of mobile apps around the world (TikTok, 2020e).

Montana's bill isn't about making user safe, it's about unilaterally restricting the freedom of Montanans based on nothing more than fears and falsehoods (TikTok, 2023b).

(Transcribed) Make no mistake, this is a ban, a ban on TikTok, and a ban on you and YOUR voice. Politicians may say otherwise, but don't get confused, many who sponsored the bill admit a TikTok ban is their ultimate goal (TikTok, 2024a).

Reflecting the platform's explicit commitment to respecting international human rights principles and legal frameworks in its community guidelines since 2023, TikTok has repurposed its value commitment by turning it into a strategic counterargument, aligning itself with "American values" (free expression and open market) and U.S. constitutional rights (freedom of expression and due process), while reinforcing its position as a "global business," assigning itself the right to exist and operate like any other global businesses in the nation:

This Executive Order risks undermining global businesses' trust in the United States' commitment to the rule of law, which has served as a magnet for investment and spurred decades of American economic growth. And it sets a dangerous precedent for the concept of free expression and open markets (TikTok, 2020e).

This unconstitutional law is a TikTok ban, and we will challenge it in court. We believe the facts and the law are clearly on our side, and we will ultimately prevail (TikTok, 2024a).

(Transcribed) This is actually ironic, because the freedom of expression on TikTok reflects the same American values that make the United States a beacon of freedom. TikTok gives everyday American

a powerful way to be seen and that's why so many people have made TikTok part of their daily lives (TikTok, 2024a).

Relatedly, TikTok's response to the U.S. ban mirrors the wider geopolitical tensions, with its fate in Western markets increasingly tied with the strained relationship between China and the United States. Specifically, the platform has become a symbol for geopolitical disputes and an often-blamed culprit in national security threats regarding disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic and cyber espionage, two official justifications for the attempted ban initiated by the Trump Administration and the India government in 2020 (see Ellis-Petersen, 2020; The White House, 2020). However, these justifications arguably masked deeper, geopolitical motives, such as the U.S.-China trade war and the border crisis between China and India (see Gray, 2021; Kumar & Thussu, 2023; Mishra et al., 2022). Consequently, TikTok's positioning as *a global platform that operates independently out of the Chinese government's reach*, becomes a clear strategic choice:

TikTok has never shared user data with the Chinese government, nor censored content at its request. In fact, we make our moderation guidelines and algorithm source code available in our Transparency Center, which is a level of accountability no peer company has committed to. We even expressed our willingness to pursue a full sale of the US business to an American company (TikTok, 2020e).

The ban's sponsors say it will address national security concerns, that TikTok operates as a surveillance tool of the Chinese government. That's simply not true. The fact is, all data for our U.S. users is stored on servers in the United States, and U.S.-based personnel manage access to that data and the algorithms that determine your For You feed (TikTok, 2023b).

The key personnel responsible for TikTok, including its CEO, Global Chief Security Officer, and General Counsel, are all Americans based in the United States—and therefore are not subject to Chinese law. U.S. content moderation is likewise led by a U.S.-based team and operates independently from China, and, as noted above, the TikTok application stores U.S. user data on servers located in the United States and Singapore (TikTok, 2020f).

While geopolitical and national security concerns seemingly dominate the debate, the issue also concerns TikTok's rapid rise as a strong contender in the global platform market, challenging U.S. platforms and their dominance (Gray, 2021). In the face of the banning threat posed by the Trump Administration in 2020, the platform defiantly suggested that Facebook supported the move, positioning it as a malicious competitor trying to protect its market dominance by eliminating TikTok's presence in the U.S. market:

At TikTok we welcome competition. We think fair competition makes all of us better. To those who wish to launch competitive products, we say bring it on. Facebook is even launching another copycat product, Reels (tied to Instagram), after their other copycat Lasso failed quickly. But let's focus our energies on fair and open competition in service of our consumers, rather than maligning

attacks by our competitor – namely Facebook – disguised as patriotism and designed to put an end to our very presence in the US (TikTok, 2020d).

The development of TikTok's positioning and its supported storylines in response to regulatory threats illustrates a broader narrative of governance dilemmas faced by platforms amid geopolitical tensions: While the state may leverage discourses such as national security in pursuit of digital sovereignty from platforms' control over data and digital infrastructure, platform companies may defend themselves through inverting the state narratives by positioning itself as the moralistic, rights-bearing market actor oppressed by state hegemony and digital protectionism.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, we analyzed how TikTok discursively constructs a sense of platform accountability in its community guidelines and news releases. We identified three, co-evolving discourses, where the platform has positioned itself since 2018, first, as a platform that strives to build a community for everyday, non-elite creativity and joy. Secondly, and especially since 2020, we identify a discourse that emphasizes safety and responsible self-governance supported by expert collaborations and voluntary information disclosure. In the third discourse, highlighted especially since 2023, TikTok presents itself as a global platform committed to universal human rights standards and the principles of fair competition and open markets. We argue that these discourses function as tools to construct a sense of accountability by strategically positioning the platform in relation to different stakeholder demands. In the first discourse, TikTok positions itself particularly for its users and in relation to other platforms. The second discourse, in turn, can be seen as a response to growing demands of content moderation and accountability, especially in the EU. Finally, the third discourse explicitly addresses concerns about the Chinese origin on the platform and the looming ban in the United States. Taken together, TikTok's accountability, at least for the platform itself, serves as a dynamic self-representation – one that suggests the platform is (and should be) held morally, socially, and legally accountable for its very existence in the platform market and the wider society.

Building on the three discourses traced above, we contend that platform controversies and regulatory pressure have significantly reshaped TikTok's value and positioning discourse, most notably in January 2020 and March 2023, when the platform pivoted on "safety and trust" and "global/universal rights stewardship" in response to external scrutiny. Beyond building legitimacy and justifying self-governance (e.g., Gillespie, 2018a; Scharlach et al., 2023), TikTok's value discourse thus serves an adaptable role in balancing contradictory demands. By wrapping itself in the language of international values and rights, as seen especially in the third discourse, TikTok mobilizes a defensive script for navigating geopolitical scrutiny and contesting regulatory and geopolitical threats.

These findings are in line with previous research on platform values that has also noted the malleable character of the platforms' value discourses (e.g., Chan et al., 2023; Scharlach, 2024; Scharlach et al., 2023) extends this literature by conceptualizing platform values as a relational and performative instrument that reflects the asymmetrical power dynamics between the platforms, users and states. Yet it needs to be noted

that our approach is limited to the analysis of public communications and does not grant us access to the company's internal decision-making or reasoning.

Based on our analysis, however, it appears that value discourse in TikTok's community guidelines and public communications is strategically ambiguous. This is a key communicative and public relations practice for organizations facing contradictory social expectations, operationalized through the deliberate use of ambiguous messages designed to be interpreted differently by different parties, allowing the organization to act flexibly toward relevant goals (e.g., von der Wense & Hoffjann, 2023, p. 4). TikTok's strategic ambiguity in its value discourse reflects the platform's rising power in the platform market but also its vulnerability to developments in international relations. In this context, discursive adaptability in the use of platform values in TikTok's governance discourse becomes a central tool to mediate different external pressures in order to ensure market survival.

Platforms are complex global and local power brokers: they foster economic growth, cultural exchange, and connectivity, while also enabling disinformation, hatred, and conflict. As corporations, they juggle responsibilities in relation to shareholders, consumers, and society, while gatekeeping resources and pursuing profitability. This complexity challenges the accountability of platforms' self-governance and their national and regional policy approaches. Although state pressure was a key driver of TikTok's evolving value and governance discourse, the platform maintains *different* relationships with states worldwide, adapting its governance approach to local moral codes and political arrangements (e.g., Liu, 2024). Our analysis also suggests this, even though the research was limited to the United States and the European Union, both of which are pursuing ideals in contrast to China's state-driven regulatory model. Yet they still differ over issues such as user freedom, market focus, and security matters (Bradford, 2023). At the time of writing (June 2025), TikTok's U.S. ban has remained legally and politically unresolved. In the EU, the platform was found to be in violation of the DSA regarding its advertising transparency (European Commission, 2025), and is under investigation for issues including addictive algorithm design, child protection, and election interference (European Commission, 2024a, 2024b). These tensions and uncertainties underscore the fragmented nature of the global platform governance landscape, where platform accountability is continually negotiated among regions with diverse policy priorities.

Beyond the platform-state dynamic, TikTok's turbulent regulatory journey and global accountability challenges appear to offer a template for other Chinese platforms navigating similar geopolitical tensions in the Western markets. This can be seen in emerging disputes about Shein and Temu, two e-commerce platforms that thrive on low-cost, middleman-cutting retail models but face criticism for exploiting legal loopholes (e.g., Martin, 2025). TikTok's invocation of universal values and rights has seen similar applications in Shein's "Human Rights Policy" published in April 2024, where the platform also aligns itself with international principles and rights, such as the UN Declaration of Human Rights and international labour rights (see SHEIN, 2024). While it is no surprise that platforms may adjust their value discourse in relation to one another (Gillespie, 2018a, pp. 71–72), TikTok's value discourse and its development may serve as a survival guide or even best practice for other Chinese platforms pursuing global legitimacy.

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