

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

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 humor—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.

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. The app is wildly popular among teenagers and two-thirds of all TikTok users are aged under 30, according to Sensor Tower. 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 pedophilia 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 criticizing 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. 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 Azeem 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 Siddiqui 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?'" — AFP



The portrait of late K-pop star Goo Hara is seen surrounded by flowers at a memorial altar at a hospital in Seoul. — AFP

CYBER BULLYING, STARSUICIDES: THE DARK SIDE OF SOUTH KOREA'S K-POP WORLD

The apparent suicide of a second K-pop artist in a month has cast renewed focus in South Korea on vicious personal attacks and cyber bullying of vulnerable young stars, and how it mostly goes unpunished. The police consider cyber violence a serious crime and have an active program educating the public how not to fall prey to online attacks, or to become the perpetrator.

Charges laid are steadily on the rise with nearly 150,000 cases last year, but they form just a minuscule portion of what goes on and there is no good recourse for the victims in a country once touted as one of the most wired on earth, police say. "It's rather simple with physical violence, as the victim can go see a doctor, but with cyber violence, there is no cure," says Jeon Min-su, a cyber crime investigator with the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency.

K-pop singer Koo Hara was found dead in her home on Sunday and the police found a handwritten note despairing about her life. She

had been subjected to vicious attacks online about her relationships with men, local media said. Koo had spoken out against cyber bullying. She was found unconscious at her home in May and hospitalized, and a month after the incident she said she was suffering from depression and vowed to fight malicious online comment.

Koo was friends with the K-pop star Sulli, who was found dead in October, who was also outspoken against cyber bullying. The Korean pop music world is popular across Asia but has a dark underbelly. Earlier this year, several male K-pop stars and one of the industry's biggest producers were questioned by police in connection with illegal gambling and prostitution.

Kwon Young-chan, comedian-turned-counselor who has himself been a victim of online violence, said stars have little recourse when they come under attack and it is almost impossible to avoid rumors and personal attacks. "When the perpetrators write vicious comments, they first begin with a 'light tap' and the scale of cyber

bullying then intensifies to a 'punch'", he said in an interview.

The rumors and personal attacks online make their way into the stars' personal lives, Kwon said. Both Sulli and Koo had been with girl bands and later broke out on their own, which made them more vulnerable, Kwon said. "After the artists began performing solo, they had to deal with depression and attacks against them all on their own."

Member of parliament Park Sun-sook, a former presidential spokeswoman who first addressed the issue of online attacks in 1998, wants to make it possible for anyone to ask web portals to take down malicious or blatantly false comments. "Young stars are exposed with no defense to cyber violence. It's time for the law and the society to protect them," she said. — Reuters

Naked Dutch model's death plunge was murder, says Malaysian police

The death of a teenage Dutch model who fell naked from an up-market apartment, allegedly after drug-fuelled group sex, is being treated as murder, Malaysian police said. Ivana Smit tumbled from the 20th floor of a Kuala Lumpur condominium and landed on a sixth floor balcony in December 2017. Her death made headlines after claims emerged that 18-year-old Smit, the American living there and his Kazakh wife consumed large quantities of drugs and alcohol and had group sex.

Police at first dismissed suggestions of foul play and a coroner ruled earlier this year that no one was criminally involved, while conceding there was likely a struggle before she fell. But Smit's family lodged a legal challenge and the High Court last week overturned the coroner's decision, ruling that "persons known or unknown" were involved and ordered a new probe.

Police announced Wednesday that the death of Smit, who reportedly lived in Malaysia since childhood, had been reclassified as murder and they were re-opening investigations. A task force will be formed for the case, said Huzir Mohamed, head of the police's criminal investigation department. "We will recall witnesses from whom we have taken statements, and call witnesses who were not previously interviewed," he said. Police did not say who they planned to question. The couple linked to the case are reported to have left the country. — AFP