

Lifestyle | Features

TikTok gave rural Indian women fame, fun and more

When India banned TikTok, it closed a window to the wider world for legions of women outside the big cities that provided fun, fame and even fortune. The government outlawed the video-sharing platform, and 58 other Chinese apps, this month citing data security fears. TikTok is also reportedly under greater scrutiny elsewhere including in the United States and Australia. Married soon after she completed college, 27-year-old stay-at-home mother Mamta Verma lives in a small town in Madhya Pradesh state. One day, her daughter got her to install TikTok on her phone to watch the dizzying array of zany videos uploaded from across what used to be the app's biggest international market.

Instagram and YouTube are for "the big people", Verma told AFP by phone, but TikTok she liked. She started to record and upload videos of her own. "I started with five likes on my first video. That was a big boost for me," Verma said. Soon, she had more than a million followers and was earning about 4,000 rupees (\$50) per video with her slick robot dance routines shot inside her small, simple home. "It's not a lot but my earnings from TikTok helped in running the house and also in managing finances for the new house. You know even 10 rupees is a huge amount for us," she said.

Breaking a glass ceiling

But it wasn't just the money. "Before TikTok, I didn't have the confidence to



In this file photo Indian mobile users browse through the Chinese owned video-sharing 'Tik Tok' app on smartphones in Amritsar.



Legions of women outside India's big cities found fun, and some found fame, on Chinese app TikTok.



The logo of the social media video sharing app Tiktok is displayed on a tablet screen in Paris. — AFP photos

talk to people. I would just do my work, and as a stay-at-home wife I never made eye contact with people or even spoke much," Verma said. Speaking a vast number of languages and dialects, around 70 percent of India's 1.3 billion people live in rural areas, a world away from big cities such as Mumbai and New Delhi. Amitabh Kumar from Social Media Matters, a group encouraging "social media for social change", said that for many people in this huge hinterland, TikTok was a "glass ceiling breaker". "Instead of Bollywood and rich people, finally there was a chance for common people to create something in 15 seconds which makes you laugh or cry or think or engage," he told AFP.

Its different tools were simple to use for those who don't speak or read

English or Hindi, and the app worked well on low-speed internet. "Twitter cracked the short-form storytelling in text—with 140 and then 280 (characters). I think TikTok did it with 15 seconds," he added. And it reminded the urban elite of India's vast diversity and chasmic differences in wealth. "What we, people sitting in Delhi, probably judged and made fun of was high-class entertainment for a lot of people who never got a chance to express themselves," he said. "Here was for the first time a space that rural India was enjoying."

'Not a big person'

Another minor star was Rupal Manoj Bhandole, 29, a housewife and mother who left school at 14 living in a small

town in Maharashtra state that gets piped water for an hour a day and endures frequent power cuts. She would upload videos of herself poking fun at her weak economic status—and soon amassed 300,000 followers. "A person who works with a Marathi TV show called me a star... I can't tell you happy I felt," she told AFP. "I only studied until Class 9. I'm not a big person." Bhandole said she wept when TikTok was banned.

Conservative family

Archana Arvind Dhormise hopes the benefits she derived from the platform will last. The 35-year-old from Pimpalgaon in Maharashtra seldom left home for fear of censure from her conservative family and neighbours. But then the home beautician became the

"Rani Mukherji of TikTok"—a reference to a famous Bollywood actress—dancing and miming to famous songs, and gaining 75,000 fans. She won a local competition for one of her TikTok videos. Now she has landed a part in a short film.

"I had never in my life gone up on stage and spoken or even initiated a conversation without having a million thoughts in my head," Dhormise told AFP. "But being on TikTok and seeing all the love I was getting gave me the confidence to keep that going, and also be confident in the real world."—AFP



This photo shows the YouTube SarahCooper Comedy channel on a computer screen and a sketch of US author and comedian Sarah Cooper on a mobile phone.—AFP

How to Sarah Cooper: The US comedian lip-synching Trump into a punchline

She is quickly becoming the internet's favourite Donald Trump impersonator but Sarah Cooper does it without saying a word—preferring to let the president she calls her "head writer" do the talking for her. The former Google employee has shot to fame during the coronavirus pandemic with her trademark lip-synching of some of the US leader's greatest hits. Each of the Jamaican-born comedian's homemade sketches riffs on a recent Trump soliloquy that has gained notoriety for being unintentionally amusing or perplexing.

She parodies these unwieldy rhetorical symphonies in clips with titles that reflect Trump's topic of choice, such as "How to Obamagate" and "How to strong death totals." As the United States negotiates a fraught civil rights reckoning, an election between two aging white men and a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic, the videos have gone the right kind of "viral." And they have thrust the 40-something into the spotlight as one of the country's most relevant and indispensable comics. Cooper says the clips appeal in part because they demonstrate that Trump's more eccentric utterances are only seen as part of normal discourse because it is the president speaking.

Exhibit Number One, for Cooper: the White House coronavirus task force briefings, which resumed Tuesday after being halted amid stinging criticism over Trump's exaggerated claims on the public health response and his promotion of bogus treatments. "Being a black woman, I could never get away with talking like that in a meeting, let alone as president of the United States," she told Vanity Fair.

'How to medical'

Cooper shot to fame on TikTok and Twitter, where her upstart impersonations garnered millions of likes just as the nation's top comics retreated homeward to film their shows from basements and living rooms, putting her production values on par with theirs. In "How to cognitive" Cooper lip-synchs the president in a recent Fox News interview professing to have "aced" an unspecified cognitive test, baiting Democratic rival Joe Biden whom, Trump alleges, "couldn't pass one." With smug self-satisfaction, Cooper holds up proof of the completed assessment: the page of a colouring book which looks like it has been scrawled over by an ungainly toddler. However it was a 49-second clip of Trump's now-infamous suggestion that

injecting disinfectant could help fight the coronavirus that cemented Cooper's status. That video instantly made her the high priestess of what has come to be known as front-facing camera comedy, a new-ish genre of lo-fi sketches using the front-facing camera of a cell phone.

The clip, "How to medical," features Trump speaking during an April task force press briefing in which he also pondered whether bringing "light inside the body" might help combat the disease. Cooper delivers the monologue with wild, darting eyes and the kind of power-posturing body language that simultaneously betrays an easy confidence and yet the sort of pompous swagger born of deep unacknowledged insecurity. "I'm envious of his abilities to sort of BS his way through life," Cooper told MSNBC Tuesday, adding that when imitating Trump "I feel like I'm getting just a little bit of that confidence that I wish more women had and I wish I had." The topics aren't new terrain for Cooper, who had already written two books—"100 Tricks to Appear Smart in Meetings" and "How to be Successful Without Hurting Men's Feelings."

'Close my eyes'

The videos have earned Cooper more than 1.9 million Twitter followers—a veritable who's who of Hollywood types, politicians and influencers, from former president Barack Obama to comedians Steve Martin and Ellen DeGeneres, as well as "Hamilton" creator Lin-Manuel Miranda. Mark Hamill, Luke Skywalker in the "Star Wars" movies, recently confessed on Twitter that "I close my eyes when the real #POTUS is on TV speaking & just picture @sarahcpr. It's really helped control my gag-reflex." Jerry Seinfeld has retweeted Cooper, as has actor and refugee rights activist Ben Stiller, who called her recent "How to immigration policy" clip his "favourite of all the ones that I really like that are also my favourite."

And with November's presidential election still more than 100 days away, there's not likely to be a shortage of useable sound bites. "I'll keep on doing them as long as my head writer gives me material," Cooper told The Los Angeles Times. Until now, Trump impersonations have been famously dominated by actor Alec Baldwin, who portrays the president on "Saturday Night Live." — AFP

Kanye West's erratic behaviour puts spotlight on bipolar disorder

US rapper and apparent presidential candidate Kanye West has opened up in the past about his struggles with bipolar disorder. But his recent erratic behaviour has again called into question his health and treatment. He launched his election campaign Sunday with a rambling speech that saw him rant incoherently, reveal he had wanted to abort his daughter, and break down in tears. Other celebrities who have spoken publicly about their diagnoses include actor Stephen Fry and the late fashion designer Alexander McQueen. What is the mental illness and why is it often associated with creative people?

Highs and lows

Bipolar disorder, formerly known as "manic depression," is characterized by extreme mood swings. On the one hand, patients experience very high periods known as "mania" when they feel energized, elated and can make reckless decisions. They sometimes also experience delusions. "They can almost have no inhibitions at all, which means they can spend their life savings in a day," said Andrew Nierenberg, a psychiatry professor at Harvard. "They can do something that's really bad judgment that they wouldn't ordinarily do, either sexually, or in relationships, or work."

The other "pole" of the illness is depression: ultra-low episodes that can include inability to feel pleasure and suicidal thoughts. In fact the suicide rate among bipolar disorder patients is 10-30 times higher than that of the general population. The illness affects up to three percent of the population, which makes it more common than schizophrenia but rarer than depression.

And there can be much variation among patients, said Timothy Sullivan, the chair of psychiatry at Staten Island University Hospital. Some are more depressive and rarely manic, while others are the other way around. As a result, diagnoses are typically delayed for years. If a patient has so far only experienced depression, they may be misdiagnosed. West first revealed his diagnosis on his 2018 album "Ye," where he called it his "superpower." Last year, he revealed it caused him paranoid delusions and described being handcuffed during treatment.

Risk factors

Bipolar disorder is known to be "one of the more heritable mental illnesses" said Katherine Burdick, a psychologist at Harvard and the Brigham and Women's Hospital. If one of your parents had the

disorder, your risk is somewhere between 10 to 20 percent. Scientists are looking for the genes responsible, and trying to understand how these might affect the parts of the brain that deal with emotion. Another line of research suggests that bipolar disorder could be linked to a flaw in how cells regulate energy, said Nierenberg.

There may also be environmental factors. For many, but not all patients, "there's a higher rate of childhood trauma, childhood abuse and neglect," said Burdick. Substance abuse is also a risk factor, and women sometimes develop it later in life compared to men.

COVID a trigger?

The bedrock for treatment is mood stabilizing drugs. Lithium, which has been used since the 1940s, is still considered by many clinicians as the "gold standard" despite side effects. Anti-inflammatory drugs that reduce an abnormal immune response are being investigated as a treatment, but research is preliminary. Experts have also started to understand the role that the disruption of "social rhythms" play in bipolar disorder, which has shifted more attention toward therapy. For instance, the death of a pet can trigger a depression-mania cycle, but when scientists studied such events closely, they realized patients were not driven by grief alone.

"Not only did the person suffer psychologically from that loss, but they used to take the dog out for walks, they got exercise, and it also got them up early in the day so that they had social interactions," said Sullivan. People with bipolar disorder are sensitive to such disruptions, which means events like the coronavirus pandemic and lockdowns can cause particular harm. "I have actually had one patient who I haven't seen in more than 10 years, who I don't currently treat, who called me up out of the blue and she's clearly manic," said Sullivan. Support groups like the Depression Bipolar Support Alliance are credited with raising awareness and destigmatizing the illness.

There is thought to be an over-representation of artists, writers and musicians among people with bipolar disorder, a subject explored in the book "Touched with Fire." Figures from history who may have had the illness include Vincent Van Gogh. "Creative people are distinguished by particularly unique ways of thinking that involve intense emotional experiences" explained Sullivan.—AFP



US actress Amber Heard leaves after giving evidence at the libel trial by her former husband US actor Johnny Depp against News Group Newspapers (NGN), at the High Court in London, on Tuesday.



US actor Johnny Depp leaves after attending his libel trial against News Group Newspapers (NGN), at the High Court in London on Tuesday.—AFP photos

Amber Heard denies affairs with Elon Musk, James Franco

Amber Heard on Tuesday denied having an affair with billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk, as she gave evidence in ex-husband Johnny Depp's high-profile London libel action. Depp, 57, had accused the 34-year-old actress of having liaisons with the Tesla and SpaceX founder and the Hollywood actor James Franco during their stormy two-year marriage. But giving evidence she rejected the claims, in particular dismissing suggestions Musk visited her regularly at night from March 2015, not long after the couple wed. "I wasn't even in communication with Elon until 2016," she told London's High Court on her second day on the witness stand.

Depp, star of "The Pirates of the Caribbean" franchise, is suing British tabloid The Sun and the author of a 2018 article that claimed he was a "wife-beater". He maintains it severely damaged his reputation. Depp's lawyer, Eleanor Laws, read out a 2016 text message sent by Musk offering Heard protection against Depp after an alleged fight between the couple. "The offer would stand, even if you never wanted to see me again... anyway, sorry for being an idiot," he wrote. "The radio silence hurts a lot. It only matters because I really like you." The text was sent the day after Heard claims the actor hit her in the face with a mobile phone during an argument, and while she was considering obtaining a restraining order.

Heard claimed on Monday that Depp threatened to kill her on a number of occasions, and subjected her to verbal and physical violence while under the influence of drink and drugs. On Tuesday, Heard acknowledged hitting Depp during a particularly nasty argument in March 2015 whose details have been in dispute throughout the trial. "I did strike Johnny that day in defence of my sister," she said, expressing fear that Depp was about to push her sister Whitney down the stairs.—AFP



In this file photo Kanye West meets with US President Donald Trump in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, DC.—AFP