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Follower Growth and Engagement Trends of TikTok Refugees: A Comparative Study of Migration to Rednote

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Abstract. In recent years, platform migration has become an increasingly common phenomenon in the social media landscape. Due to the temporary ban of TikTok in the United States, many users tend to create an account on an alternative Chinese platform---- Rednote. This paper focuses on two groups of users, "TikTok refugees" and "Rednote native influencers". TikTok refugees refer to people who were banned from using TikTok in their own countries and started to create an account on Rednote against the administrative order, Rednote native influencers are people who originated on Rednote. By using time-series and panel regression models, this research analyzes creator performance based on follower counts and interaction metrics collected across both platforms. Although there is an increasing relevance of platform migration, the case study between TikTok and Rednote is newly developed, and limited research has quantitatively examined the behavioural, growth, and engagement differences between these two groups. Besides, this study contributes to the literature on digital platform migration by providing empirical evidence on performance dynamics and audience behaviour. The findings offer insights for platform managers and creators navigating post-ban digital environments.

Keywords: platform migration, TikTok refugees, Rednote native influencers, fans' growth, engagement rate.

1. Introduction

TikTok was banned by the US government on January 19, 2025, and it was an issue driven by the concern that data privacy may be accessed by the Chinese government. According to this fear, The Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) started to investigate ByteDance's acquisition of Musical.ly in 2019 and claimed that it was a potential threat to national security. Then President Trump signed an administrative order on 6 August, which required ByteDance to divest TikTok's US operations in 45 days, otherwise, its business would be suspended. In September, Trump issued another order banning American firms from doing business with TikTok. After the US was changed to Biden's administration, Biden cancelled Trump's executive order in June 2021 but

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asked CFIUS to continue reviewing TikTok's security risks. Later, in December 2022, Biden signed a bill banning TikTok on federal devices. It was still a heated dispute in the US for a couple of months, TikTok's CEO Shou Zi Chew attended a U.S. congressional hearing in March 2023 and made a response to data security and privacy concerns. Soon Montana passed a bill banning TikTok downloads by the state in April, but was blocked by the courts. The problem was moving forward to 2024, The US House of Representatives passed a bill in March, requiring ByteDance to divest TikTok's US operations within 165 days or face a ban on app stores offering TikTok. Next, in April, the bill passed the Senate and was signed into law by Biden, giving ByteDance nine months to sell TikTok's US operations, with a three-month extension. Finally, TikTok was temporarily closed on January 19, 2025, and it returned to the app store in the US on February 14. The series of regulations aroused American opposition, and then rising numbers of TikTok users moved to a platform that is popular in China—Rednote, increasing the phenomenon of platform migration of TikTok refugees.

2. Literature review

2.1. Platform economics

In the era of digital transformation, platform-based business models have revolutionized industries, giving rise to a concept known as platform economics. Platform economics is a branch of economics that analyzes the functioning, design, and impact of platform-based business models. These platforms operate as intermediaries facilitating exchanges between distinct user groups, often leveraging network effects, data-driven strategies, and the low marginal costs of digital distribution.

Zhong, Zhong, Guo, and Yan compared the marketing strategies of TikTok and Xiaohongshu (referred to as Rednote in their study) using the 4Ps framework—product, price, place, and promotion—and the theory of two-sided markets. They concluded that although both platforms extensively utilize short videos to engage with users, their capabilities and user targeting approaches differ. TikTok focuses more on precise targeting of customer resources, as most users primarily use the platform for relaxation and entertainment by browsing personalized content. Therefore, content that aligns with users' habits at first glance plays a crucial role. In contrast, Rednote emphasizes personalized information flow recommendations, requiring deeper investigations into consumer segmentation not only by user type and characteristics but also by the users' purpose for using the app [1].

In fact, the provision of short videos on Rednote has been developed in the past few years, which increasing numbers of users post videos both on tiktok and rednote. Thus, nowadays, the preferences and precision of people's first sight has become more and more important in the role of managing rednote.

In conclusion, this comprehensive literature review has revealed the distinctions between the main core of operations of TikTok and Rednote, and have a clear understanding of the relationship and importance of 4Ps in the role of two platforms. However, further research is needed to analyze the variations on the main approach and target due to the development of services that two platforms are provided.

2.2. Platform migration

In recent years, platform migration has become a big trend. Users and content creators are moving from one social media platform to another because of changes in rules, updates to how platforms work, or problems with the platform. This is often called "digital refugees," which means people

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who have to leave their original platform and find a new one that works better for them. These changes are caused by personal reasons and outside factors, like politics, society, and money.

Cava, Aiello, and Tagarelli explored the flow of users from Twitter to Mastodon, especially in the wake of Elon Musk's takeover of Twitter. They concluded that switching between the platforms isn't simply a personal decision. It is also subject to social forces. Migration is hugely dependent on early users, trust in the new system, and how people feel it is legitimate and reliable. These findings demonstrate that migration is not purely the decision of a single person; it can be influenced by the networks of the people around them [2]. This concept explains why TikTok creators could also migrate to platforms such as Rednote if their current platform runs into issues.

Hou and Shiau examine the reasons users transitioned from Facebook to Instagram. Based on what they like to see, their dedication to the platform's rules, and their view on how real, honest, or fake the platform is, the users decided to switch platforms [3]. The research described here indicates that changing to a new platform is not merely a matter of employing alternate technology. It shifts how users perceive themselves and their audience. For TikTok creators, switching to a platform like Rednote means shifting their content and adapting to a new set of rules. And so, migration isn't just about moving but it's about also conceiving ways for creators to engage better with their audience.

Ning examined Chinese creators' mobility across platforms such as Xiaohongshu. Her exploration found that a platform's functionality, how much money creators were able to make and how the content is organized play a role in what creators pay attention to. It has a good opportunity and it also has challenges specifically with regard to the visibility of creators and how the creators had to connect with small evergreen groups [4]. Based on Ning's research, creators are not only reacting to outside problems but they are also deciding what they see as fair, what they are able to express and how much money they can make in the long run.

2.3. Follower growth and engagement rate in platform migration

Users' platform migration has a significant impact on influencers' follower growth rates and interaction rates.

According to Zannettou et al., when Twitter users migrate to Mastodon, the number of followers of the influencers grows rapidly at first but slows down over time. This phenomenon is mainly because, in the early stages of migration, influencers migrate to a new platform that is fresh to the platform's users and thus attracts a lot of attention [5].

In terms of engagement and fan-influencer interactions, Micallef et al. show that bloggers' engagement, such as likes and comments, after migrating to a new platform is usually higher in the initial period but then shows a decreasing trend. The reasons can be a mismatch between the platform's algorithmic recommendations and the user's interests, making it difficult to accurately send content to the target audience, or a cultural mismatch between the user and the new platform, leading to less interaction [6].

Migrants from banned or hostile platforms are not blank slates; they arrive with followers, content templates, and discursive styles Instead of starting over and building up followers, users who migrate to new platforms often transfer their existing communities to the new platforms. These "digital refugees" will utilize the followers, reputation, and content styles accumulated on the previous platform to quickly rebuild influence on the new platform [7].

In conclusion, platform migration is not just a simple transfer of content publishing platforms, but a continuous evolution of influencers' interactions with their followers. By analyzing changes in follower growth and interaction rates over time, related studies reveal the adaptive capacity and

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developmental potential of migrating users on new platforms. These findings are important references for understanding the phenomenon of user migration to the Rednote platform in the context of the banning of TikTok.

3. Data

3.1. Data sources and sample selection

This study examines 38 TikTok migrant creators (commonly referred to as "TikTok refugees") and 30 native Rednote creators, covering various content categories, including food, art, personal vlogs, classical Chinese studies, celebrities, astronomy, appearance, fashion, comedy, sleep aid, dance, and pets. The selection criteria for TikTok migrant creators required them to have at least 10,000 followers on Rednote. Data collection began on January 26, with daily recordings at midnight, capturing the follower count, likes, and saves of each creator. This longitudinal approach enables a comprehensive assessment of the adaptation and performance of TikTok migrant creators on Rednote.

The sample for this study was selected with the following steps: We used the Rednote keyword search and searched for the keyword "refugee," across Rednote's recommendation algorithm for identifying relevant creators. Afterwards, we combed through the following lists of verified TikTok immigrant creators to find additional candidates. Outcomes might experience discontinuity issues because some creators stopped content production during the study. When a certain data creator could not be included or was not available, alternative creators were introduced to maintain the integrity and continuity of the dataset.

3.2. Data analysis methods

Using quantitative analysis, this study investigates key performance metrics such as followers, likes, and saves. To depict the impacts of migration visually, we constructed follower growth rate graphs for both platforms to assess the growth patterns of TikTok migrant creators on Rednote. In addition, content analysis was realized in order to compare TikTok migrant creators to native Rednote creators through content performance and audience engagement.

3.3. Data presentation

Visualized statistical representations—including follower growth rate curves, comparative like-count charts, and save-trend graphs—present the results. These visual tools provide a clear picture of the adaption process of TikTok migrant creators on Rednote and provide empirical backing for further investigations.

4. Hypotheses development

To explore the differences in follower interactions between TikTok refugees and Rednote native influencers and the factors influencing them, this study proposes three hypotheses based on the collection of influencers' follower data and articles related to the platform economy online. These three hypotheses focus on the comparison of influencer fans' growth rates, the comparison of engagement rates, and the change in influencer fans' growth rates over time.

Hypothesis 1: Difference in Fan Growth Rate

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H1a: The fans' growth rates of TikTok refugees are similar with that of Rednote native influencers.

H1b: The fans' growth rates of TikTok refugees are higher than that of Rednote native influencers.

Hypothesis 2: Difference in Engagement Rate

H2a: There is no significant difference between the engagement rates of TikTok refugees and that of Rednote native influencers.

H2b: The engagement rates of TikTok refugees are lower than that of Rednote native influencers.

Hypothesis 3: Refugee Fans Growth over Time

H3a: The fans' growth rates of TikTok refugee influencers remain stable across the observed time period.

H3b: The fans' growth rates of TikTok refugee influencers significantly declines over time.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. H1: fans growth comparison

In order to test the H1 hypothesis, that is, whether the follower growth rate of TikTok migrated influencers is significantly higher than that of Rednote native influencers, we conducted regression analyses on the follower growth rates of migrated and native influencers.

Table 1: Regression of fans' growth rates on Rednote

	(1)
	Fans' growth rates on Rednote
refugee	0.012*
	(1.79)
_cons	0.003
	(0.64)
N	385
adj. R^2	0.006

Note: t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

The regression results from Table 1 above show that the coefficient of TikTok refugee influencers is positive ($\beta = 0.012$, $p < 0.10$), suggesting that the follower growth rate of TikTok refugee influencers is higher than that of Little Rednote's native influencers. This implies that TikTok refugee influencers experienced more rapid initial fans growth than native influencers after migrating to Rednote.

This increase in follower growth may be due to the fact that TikTok refugee influencers usually bring a portion of their remaining followers from the original platform. These fans used to interact with the influencers on TikTok, and they may continue to support their favourite influencers, even after migrating to the Rednote platform, they will still follow their original favourite refugee influencers. Therefore, migrating influencers can rapidly accumulate fans at the initial stage. In addition, the freshness brought by foreigner identity is also an important factor. Since most of the

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original influencers on Rednote are Chinese, as new faces on Rednote, TikTok refugee influencers can attract a lot of attention through their American identity, and this sense of freshness can help them increase their exposure and attract more followers, especially at the initial stage of migration.

However, this hypothesis has some limitations. Although the p-value shows that the results are statistically significant, it is not very strong. This suggests that this growth is susceptible to other factors, such as the base of followers of the influencers themselves. In the long run, changes such as content adaptation, audience interaction strategies and platform algorithms can also have an impact on the growth rate of influencers' followers. Therefore, although TikTok migrated influencers have performed well in terms of initial follower growth, outperforming Rednote's native influencers, whether this trend can be sustained in the long term is still unpredictable.

5.2. H2: fans engagement rate comparison

In this research, we defined the engagement rate of bloggers on Rednote as the number of likes/followers ratio. To test hypothesis 2, which is that TikTok refugee influencers have lower follower interaction than Rednote native influencers, this study analyzes the effect of interaction between migrated influencers and their fans and plots an engagement rate distribution diagram.

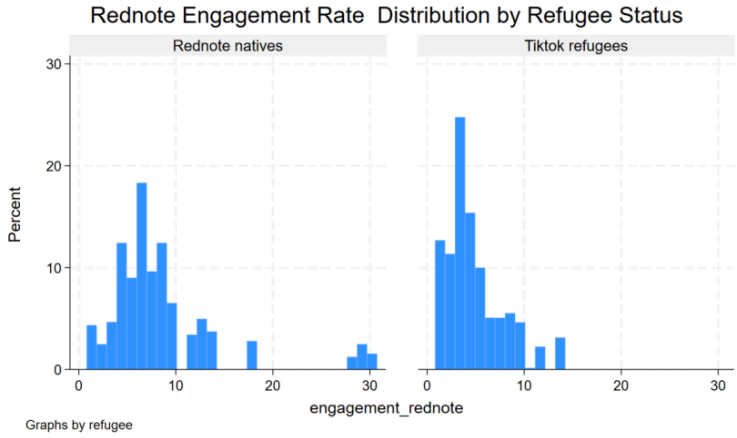

Figure 1: Rednote engagement rates distribution by refugee status

According to the distribution of fans engagement rates (see Figure 1), the engagement rates of TikTok migrated influencers are generally lower than those of Rednote native influencers, with most Rednote influencers' engagement rates being at around 7-8, whereas most of the TikTok migrated influencers' engagement rates are at approximately 3-4. This suggests that while migrating influencers may have received an initial surge in follower growth, their interactions with their followers may not be as strong as those of Rednote native influencers.

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Table 2: Regression of fans' engagement rates on Rednote

	(1)	(2)
	engagement_ Rednote	engagement_ Rednote
refugee	-3.666***	-3.421***
	(-12.91)	(-14.40)
1.track1		0.000
		(.)
2.track1		3.707***
		(5.37)
3.track1		2.650***
		(4.10)
4.track1		1.911***
		(2.74)
5.track1		5.244***
		(8.21)
6.track1		0.836
		(0.98)
7.track1		-0.422
		(-0.52)
8.track1		3.864***
		(6.12)
9.track1		2.219***
		(3.27)
10.track1		6.213***
		(8.45)
11.track1		3.629***
		(5.37)
12.track1		10.923***
		(15.25)
_cons	8.449***	4.507***
	(36.19)	(7.65)
N	992	992
adj. R^2	0.143	0.427

Note:t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

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On this basis, the authors did a quantitative analysis of the fan engagement rate. The results of the regression analysis from Table 2 above support this observation, showing a significant negative correlation between influencers' engagement rates, with a negative coefficient for the TikTok refugee variable ($\beta = -3.666$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that although TikTok-migrated influencers have a higher follower growth rate than Rednote influencers, the engagement rate is much lower than Rednote bloggers on the same track. This might be due to the differences in user culture and platform ecology between TikTok and Rednote, and refugee influencers may not be able to quickly adapt to the content style or community atmosphere on Rednote, resulting in fewer likes and comment interactions on their works. In addition, although the migrating influencers have accumulated a large number of fans on TikTok, not all of them will follow them to migrate to Rednote, which leads to a decrease in the fan engagement rate of the migrating bloggers.

The regression analysis also includes "track" as a control variable to explain the effect of the type of content posted on the engagement rate. If certain tracks, such as beauty and food, seem to have higher engagement rates, it may affect the overall results. After adding the track variable, the coefficient of the TikTok refugee variable remained negative ($\beta = -3.421$, $p < 0.01$), which was not significantly different from the previous one, suggesting that tracks did not substantially influence the engagement rate between influencers and their followers.

However, it is important to note that the content style, posting frequency, or other personal factors of the influencers may also play a role in the differences in interaction rates observed in this study.

5.3. H3: refugee fans growth over time

To explore Hypothesis 3, which is that the follower growth rate of TikTok refugee influencers has declined over time, the authors conducted a regression analysis. In this regression, the authors controlled for blogger ID and content track as fixed effects to subtract their influencers and interference. This means that the declining trend in interaction rates is more likely to be caused by the time factor itself rather than the track in which the type of content posted by the influencers is located.

Table 3: Regression of fans growth rate over time

	(1)	(2)
	TikTok Refugees	Rednote Native Influencers
date	-0.000768**	0.000137***
	(0.000304)	(0.0000350)
Observations	253	132

Note:Standard errors in parentheses

Influencer fixed effects: Yes

Time trend (date): Yes

* p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

According to the regression results from Table 3 above, the coefficient of the interaction term of non-refugee × date is positive ($\beta = 0.000137$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that the follower growth rate of Rednote originals has slightly increased, but the trend is basically smooth. In contrast, the interaction term coefficient of refugee × date is negative ($\beta = -0.000768$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that

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TikTok refugees may have attracted a higher number of followers in the early stages of their migration to Rednote, but that this trend has failed to persist and has gradually decreased over time.

This declining trend may reflect the changing interests of the platform's users. Migrating influencers' initial arrival at Rednote may have resulted in higher follower growth due to the platform's focus on foreigner influencers, as well as the following of some of the original TikTok fans. However, over time, fans become more familiar with the content of these influencers and become fatigued about their content, so the initial attention is difficult to maintain, leading to a decrease in follower growth rate.

Despite the statistical significance of the results, there are some limitations remaining. For example, this regression fails to adequately control for the disruptions caused by the algorithm and recommendation mechanism of the Rednote platform. Also, the changes relating to TikTok policies at certain time were not taken into account. Future research could further introduce some real-time policy changes as variables.

6. Conclusion and limitations

While this study contributes to the growing body of research on digital platform migration by investigating the performance and adaptation of TikTok creators on Rednote following regulatory disruption, several limitations should be noted.

Firstly, the sample includes 38 TikTok migrant creators and 30 native Rednote creators, selected based on visibility and follower count thresholds. Although this approach enables focused analysis, it excludes smaller or emerging creators who may follow alternative migration strategies or experience different adaptation patterns. As such, the findings may not fully reflect the diversity of the broader creator community.

Moreover, this study relies solely on publicly accessible quantitative metrics, such as follower counts, likes, and saves, to evaluate content performance and user engagement. While these indicators provide useful insights, they do not reflect creators' personal strategies, motivations, or emotional responses during the migration process. The lack of qualitative data limits the study's ability to explore the deeper meanings behind creators' behaviours.

In addition, although the comparative approach between TikTok and Rednote strengthens the analytical framework, there are significant structural and cultural differences between the two platforms. These include differences in algorithmic systems, user expectations, and platform features. Such differences present methodological challenges. They may influence both creator strategies and audience reactions in ways that are difficult to capture through quantitative data alone.

Finally, the geopolitical context surrounding TikTok's temporary ban and later reinstatement in the United States adds further complexity. This study began shortly after the app was removed from U.S. app stores in January 2025. As a result, the findings represent a specific moment in time. However, creator behaviour may shift as political and regulatory conditions continue to evolve.

Future research could address these limitations in several ways. Expanding the sample to include smaller or niche creators may provide a more comprehensive view of migration patterns and digital adaptation strategies. Incorporating qualitative methods, such as interviews or personal journals, would help reveal creators' subjective experiences and emotional responses.

Researchers could also consider a broader range of platforms, including YouTube Shorts, Instagram Reels, and Lemon8. This would allow for clearer distinctions between platform-specific effects and general migration trends. In addition, longitudinal studies that follow creators over time could offer deeper insights into the long-term sustainability of cross-platform migration and audience retention in new digital environments.

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