

How to Design Social Media for Youth - a TikTok case study

A new generation is rising among social media users. It is a generation of content cravers and creators; a generation seeking constant stimulation and time wasted via their devices. They are bred on memes and trends, and dominated by e-boys and VSCO girls. These are the people of TikTok, a new social media platform gaining immense popularity world-wide among the youth. It's focus on short-video and constant content is addictive, and it's popularity is disconcerting to older generations.

TikTok and similar new media applications have become increasingly central to the lives of younger generations, breaking them away from traditional media. These user-generated, short-form video outlets are sources of not only social interaction and entertainment, but culture, and their popularity confuses older generations who see these apps as simply a "trend". Because of the newness of these media forms, there is little research done concerning the reason behind their success or the greater social impact they have on their audience. By looking at the changes these applications have caused in youth culture and social media habits, I hope to showcase just how impactful these applications truly are and design my own application using these guidelines. Understanding this societal change in media consumption can help us sculpt our design thinking to fit the new generation of content consumers.

In order to start to understand how to design for young social media users, it is useful to look at the app that has most recently gained a lot of traction and popularity with them: TikTok. TikTok was released in September 2016 as the Chinese short-video platform "Douyin." It was created by the company ByteDance, which is interestingly known for being an artificial intelligence company. In 2017, Douyin was combined with the popular lip-syncing app

“musical.ly” and released to outside markets under the name of TikTok. It rapidly soared in popularity after this, becoming the most downloaded app in the United States in late 2018. Since then it has garnered more than one billion downloads, and continues to have an estimated 500 million plus monthly active users.

The app itself consists of two basic pages: the For You page, hosting videos the app has algorithmically determined the user will like, and a secondary Following page, for people the user chooses to follow. Videos take up the entire screen, with a caption at the bottom indicating the username and effects or music used. Clicking on the effects or music used tags takes the user to other videos that have also used that element. On the sides of the screen are the creator’s profile along and three buttons to like, comment, or share the video, with metrics showing how much other users have done each one. One unique feature about the app is that users scroll up or down through the videos rather than left or right. Another odd characteristic is the emphasis on the automatically generated For You page rather than the Following page. The For You page is the first screen that pops up when the app opens, and there is little motivation for the user to ever swipe over to their Following page. Videos infinitely generate on the For You page, and they appear based on what the user has liked in the past and what is currently trending. It is similar to Instagram’s Explore page, but instead of being a side feature, it is the main focus of the app.

There is a large emphasis on repetition on TikTok, with users encouraged to replicate popular videos using the same music or sound byte or do a “duet” (side-by-side video) with the original video. This repetition among users within the app leads to a big emphasis on trends, and causes stereotypes and subcommunities to form. These stereotypes include individuals like those mentioned in the introduction: e-boys and VSCO girls. It also leads to a small group of

influencers, although with the speed of which trends come and go on the app it is much more difficult to gain this type of status and popularity than it is on other apps.

Although TikTok is newly popular among younger generations, it is not favored nor beloved by all. There is a very strict divide among those who enjoy and dislike the app, with strong opinions especially on the negative side. In a survey done as research for this paper, I asked whether the responder liked TikTok and why or why not. Responses for those who did not like the app included that “it’s dumb,” “obnoxious,” and, most commonly, “cringe.”

Surprisingly, those who said they *did* like the app made similar comments but in a positive way, saying TikTok is “cringey and funny” and “bad, but funny bad.” There were also more positive comments, though, including one that said the “people are very creative on there and super funny.” It is important to keep in mind that responses came predominantly from the 18 - 22 age group (and were predominantly female), a group which is right on the upper edge of TikTok’s popularity. This, to me, also makes the results more interesting, as it further demonstrates the divide in media consumption.

An interesting trend among responders was that although many said they did not like or understand TikTok, they admitted that they sometimes enjoy the videos, especially when viewed outside the actual TikTok app. One responder exemplified this fairly well, saying “I have seen TikTok content on Twitter that I enjoyed, but I haven’t downloaded it and it doesn’t seem that interesting.” There seems to be a sort of hesitation among this age group to “confess” that they like something so “teenish,” as one responder put it. Another big contributing factor to this hesitation is Vine, which was a beloved social media app during its three year reign from 2013 - 2016 and is still sorely missed by its users to this day. Because of the similarities between the

two apps, both being short-form video platforms, some people, especially those who loved Vine, feel that TikTok is trying to replace Vine but in the worst way. There were multiple responses that indicated this, saying TikTok is “a rip off,” or “worse” or “cheaper version of Vine.”

Another topic heavily focused on in the aforementioned survey was social media use in general, asking users which platforms they preferred to use and why. Looking at numbers in the United States, top social media platforms include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, Tumblr, TikTok, Reddit, LinkedIn, and Pinterest. Among those who took my survey, the top five used weekly by responders were Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, with the favorite being tied between Twitter and Snapchat. The reasoning behind each responders favorite being their favorite most often included talk of keeping in touch with friends, seeing funny content, and ease of use. I also asked how much time responders on average spent on social media, with the majority answering two to three hours a day or more. That’s a lot of content! In regards to this content, one interesting observation I found is that although responders tended to favor images and short videos as their preferred social media content, text posts were also high up on the list. This indicates that more visual content is not always the preferred mode of delivery.

One of the most important and compelling questions I asked on the survey was for respondents to describe what their ideal social media platform would be. The answers are telling of what users currently enjoy in their social media platforms, as well as what could be improved through additional features. Some answers seemed to emphasize visual engagement, ease of use, and humor, while others focused more on being “real” (not fake) and keeping ads to a minimum. Some of the responses I thought most interesting included “any content but a good community

around it, users support users and have genuine fun,” and “focus on user generated content, lack of censorship/opt in ability for NSFW content, and data protection.” This focus on user-generated content is something that a lot of respondents seemed to mention, making it clear that many users would prefer to keep companies out of their social media.

Although users prefer seeing content from other actual users, we know this is not always the case on social media. More than half of the survey respondents indicated that they dislike seeing sponsored content while scrolling through social media. The other half appeared neutral on the subject, or said that it depended on the post. This is semi-positive news for companies, as it indicates that at least half of all social media users are willing to potentially look at an advertisement on social media and not be turned off by it.

Overall, it is clear to see that there is a divide in social media desires forming among the generations, with the younger group who grew up on social media heading in an entirely new direction with their content desires. Their desire for a constant influx of engaging content along with an accepting community to share it with is something that older social media platforms are not necessarily built for. With this information in mind, we can better prepare ourselves as designers and content creators for the shift that this new generation is going to require.

Works Cited

Herrman, John. "How TikTok Is Rewriting the World." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 10 Mar. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/03/10/style/what-is-tik-tok.html.

This article gives a general overview of what TikTok is and why it is changing how we interact with social media. It focuses on reasons why the platform is so addicting (artificial intelligence), and how this makes it innovative. It also talks about how other social media platforms have been moving towards similar machine-driven algorithms.

Perez, Sarah. "It's Time to Pay Serious Attention to TikTok." *TechCrunch*, TechCrunch, 29 Jan. 2019, techcrunch.com/2019/01/29/its-time-to-pay-serious-attention-to-tiktok/.

This article talks about what TikTok is, celebrating what makes it unique as a platform. It describes in detail the trends that makes the app successful, and discusses its ease of music selection and video editing. It also talks about the numbers behind the platform, both monetary and user-related.

Phillips, Owen. "The App That Exposes Teens to Catcalls and Harassment." Medium, Medium, 28 Sept. 2018, medium.com/s/youthnow/the-app-that-exposes-teens-to-catcalls-and-harassment-tiktok-musically-d98be52c6ff1.

This article goes into more detail about the negative effects of TikTok, including privacy issues, inappropriate content, and child exploitation. It also goes into detail about how the platform is attempting to fix these concerns.

Van Doorn, Menno, et al. "The Synthetic Generation." *Digital Happiness*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2019, labs.sogeti.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/The-Synthetic-Generation_DigitalHappiness-3-E-LR.pdf.

This journal talks about the new generation of media consumers, the "synthetic generation." It focuses on describing their characteristics, emphasizing how they are quite unique from previous generations that did not grow up online, and how they have different, (neo)romantic values.

Zhang, Xing, et al. "Exploring Short-Form Video Application Addiction: Socio-Technical and Attachment Perspectives." *Telematics and Informatics*, Pergamon, 4 July 2019, www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0736585319303302.

This article discusses the addictive effects of short-form video platforms like TikTok.