

The Sound of a Generation in the Making, TikTok

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Once known as the moderately popular app ‘Musical.ly’, Tiktok has transformed into the most popular social media platform. With over 1 billion monthly active users, Tiktok has become a social media giant- gaining attention from users all over the world, our most beloved celebrities, and news and media outlets. Since it skyrocketed to fame in the early months of the pandemic, the app has served as a refuge for teenagers and adults alike. While most joined the app to seek easy entertainment, the app also offered community, acceptance, and connection over the thick of the pandemic. Tiktok’s most unique feature is its ‘for you’ page, where a seemingly endless stream of videos by complete strangers plays on loop. The page is an algorithmic anomaly, matching every viewer with content for their specific interests- by taking the data it collects from their liked videos and other videos with shared content or shared audiences. The algorithm doesn’t just cater to the needs of its users but allows for communities of people who enjoy the same content to communicate through their same algorithmic choices. As with all emerging digital technology, TikTok has been a positive source of information sharing and innovation, as well as a negative source. Within this paper I will discuss my findings about the app and talk about all of the ways that positively and negatively impacted generally younger populations. Through its way to connect such a large audience to their niches and specific interests, Tiktok has continued the growth of internet communication and our turn towards a more digital way of life, by coming in at a perfect time in our history and monopolizing it. I will be covering the change in technology through 4 sections; Change in Development of Relationships, Change in Work, Change in Culture, and finally Change in Governing. Each will have 3 sub-sections titled Uses and Trends, Disruptive Impact, and Predictions.

CHANGE IN DEVELOPMENT OF RELATIONSHIPS

Uses and Trends

Since the rise of the first social media platforms, such as Myspace and Facebook, they have become a way for kids to virtually connect with people their age, whether they knew them in real life or not. Ever since the introduction of cell phones and portable technology, it's been this way. Chayko says, "With mobility, this kind of connectivity can take place almost constantly. Cell phones, tablets, and other mobile/portable media make it easy to reach out to others anytime, anywhere." Tiktok is no different from other forms of portable connection. The application has become a digital highschool, establishing trends, differentiating between "types" of people just as you would see in the movies. Tiktok has become the defining platform for specifically Gen-Z individuals, with most of the popular content coming from individuals aged as young as 14, to young adults in their early twenties. According to Muliadi (2020), over 60% of TikTok users are Generation Z. The platform has served as a way for the generation to connect with people their age with similar interests, proving to be a space diverse in its interests. What is so appealing about this to the generation Z in specific is the lack of interaction outside of the app. Instead of sharing popular internet memes in person, they all wind up with the same videos due to the algorithms. The app, when compared to other apps, focuses less on image as it does with content, allowing kids to more so tap into their creative sides. Social medias like Instagram and snapchat are image and popularity based, which causes kids to nit-pick their lives and only post the content they think is appealing. In the article *Teen's Social Media Habits and Experiences*, Anderson and Jiang (2019) pull from a study from the Pew Research Center, "For some teens, sharing their life online can come with added social burdens: Around four-in-ten say they feel pressure to only post content on social media that makes them look good to others (43%) or share things that will get a lot of likes or comments (37%)." What these statistics show us is the focus on how the media the teens produce is consumed by their peers rather than a focus on

producing what makes them feel good. On TikTok, this narrative is askew. There is a much larger focus on creativity- allowing the teens to express themselves in the most wholesome way possible. While there still is a want to go viral or ‘blow up’, the algorithms favor specific types of content over the name behind the content. Again, from Muliadi (2020), “Unsurprisingly, given TikTok's take on dynamic content that contrasts with Instagram's more polished feed, TikTok's expressive Gen Z users tend to have significantly higher engagement rates compared to users on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter.”(para. 9). Something else that lends into the creativity over image-based content is it attracts more viewers and interaction. Tiktok users have discovered more compelling stories and personable, intimate humor is what gets attention over the polished vagueness of Instagram content. What we get from this type of content is the community-based feel of Tiktok, where the Generation-Z creates what defines them as a generation. On TikTok, the majority of users are born after 1996. The content created there is made specifically by the generation for the generation, allowing for the definition the way that past generations have.

Disruptive Impact

Tiktok, to start, is a disruptive technology in the ways it immensely surpassed every one of its competitors, and within a year became the most populated social media sites. It took multiple ideas from other dated or expired social mediums, including older versions of itself under other aliases. The biggest part of its disruption is in connection to the way it unites the Generation Z as a majority. The technology is almost exclusively for the generation, becoming the most accessible to the generation that never had a social media made just for them. Whereas all social media made before Tiktok were mainly made for the older members of the generation and the one before. Tiktok was taken over by young people, and catering to them and the things

that they enjoy. This disruptive change made the creation of social media more accessible to the younger generation.

Predictions

I predict that this phase of social media will be seen as a defining point of generation Z history. I think that the first year of the pandemic was documented on and through the trends and videos created on the app, as it became such an emerging source of digital technology. I think that one day, the videos that were made this year will be seen as a valuable part of history.

CHANGE IN WORK

Uses and Trends

Through Tiktok, the business model for many young and old entrepreneurs alike has changed. With this being such a popular technology, large companies are scrambling to establish themselves on the platform. The role of the Tiktok algorithm plays a huge part in what gets advertised on the for-you page. What this means for large corporations is that in order to properly advertise their products they need to partner with influencers. The influencers of Tiktok are usually very young teens who gained popularity through a random slot in the For-you page and gained followers through that viral post. The application itself has skippable advertisements thrown in with regular videos, and one always appears as you open the app. The relationship with brand deals and Tiktok is a complicated one, due to its almost random and inconsistent view and like counts. The first big influencer to come through the app is a 16-year-old girl named Charli D'Amelio, who went viral for her dancing videos. With her largely very young fan-base, brands have not hesitated on making her a partner. Dunkin Donuts was the first to sponsor her and make and name a drink after her. At just 16, Charli has become a celebrity and more than

that- super wealthy. Her net worth is currently situated at a comfortable 8 million dollars, with her career only starting by chance in early 2020. (Stewart, 2021).

Charli is what *The future of social media in marketing* calls a micro-influencer- someone who has specialize knowledge of the audience and platform they are catering to, as opposed to being a celebrity who just has a monopoly over their specific fanbase. Appel et al. (2019) write, “These individuals are often seen as credible “experts” in what they post about, encouraging others to want to view the content they create and engage with them. Furthermore, using these influencers allows the brand via first person narration (compared to ads), which is considered warmer and more personal, and was shown to be more effective in engaging consumers.” What this quote is saying is basically these platform specific influencers have created a morale with their fanbase, becoming more viewed as a friend than a spokesperson or a salesperson, and this allows for consumers to be more responsive to this ‘warm’-ness.

Disruptive Impact

What makes the market of Tiktok a disruptive technology is the way it allows any company, no matter the size, to be broadcast to a large audience. When it comes to larger corporations, it is taking them more of a time to get on the trends of the Tiktok algorithm, but as Christensen and Overdorf (2000) of *Meeting the Challenge of Disruptive Change* note, “Disruptive innovations occur so intermittently that no company has a routine process for handling them.” They continue saying that the disruptive technologies offer lower profit margins, so they aren’t “attractive to the company’s best customers,” basically saying that they aren’t promised enough money by engaging in the technology- but soon the lack of knowledge catches up to them and at that point they must acknowledge the technology. When we talk about Tiktok- the first businesses to find commercial success in the market opened by the for-you page are

smaller businesses. The larger companies were eventually able to break into the market through having influencer ambassadors, but smaller businesses became their own influencers. By providing that warm and intimate atmosphere that the influencers in the aforementioned section provide, the audience of that company is more likely to buy the product because it is not only linked to their story, but the items were handmade by the producer of the advertisement/content, making this connection even deeper. Christensen and Overdorf (2000) also say this in agreement with that argument, “The reason, therefore, that large companies often surrender emerging growth markets is that smaller, disruptive companies are actually more capable of pursuing them.” This relates to my last point, in consideration to building tight, exclusive audiences who feel a connection to the product is necessary when starting any company, and especially towards a disruptive one- aiming for inclusivity for all consumers to feel rewarded by the products and companies they support.

Predictions

What I predict to happen in the future of Tiktok advertising is that as the app continues to hold the status it does, more larger brands will reach out to these influencers and continue to grow their brand and extend to these massive audiences. Charli D’Amelio isn’t going to be the only superstar to emerge from the app, as other creators rapidly grow as the days go on, I am sure that we will hear more of these partnerships. Digital partnerships have been a growing trend over the past couple of years, ever since the emergence of social media influencers. With the numbers and engagement that Tik Tok promises, I think that this trend will only accelerate. The eyes are all here, and the youth is taking a sharp turn from idolizing pop stars and movie stars to these social media stars.

CHANGE IN CULTURE

Uses and Trends

Unfortunately, the downside of having an application like Tiktok widely accessible to so many young adults and teens is that the information that should be filtered is not being filtered as closely as they should. While the application has proved to be a fun source of entertainment videos and information and community- there has been a resurgence of diet culture, and the unfortunate myths and unhealthy behaviors that come along with it. A big part of triggering media within the app itself is the use of different “beauty” filters, filters that distort your body as to make it smaller, and the normalization of editing apps such as Facetune, where you can nit-pick the details of your image down to the last detail. In the *Body-editing apps on TikTok ‘trigger eating disorders’* article, Criddle (2021) gives us this statistic, “Eating disorder charity Seed said it has seen a 68% rise in children and teenagers aged between 10 and 19 seeking support since the pandemic.” As Tiktok is the big emerging digital technology during the pandemic for young people, there is not question whether this fact and the statistic are related. With the apps, the image of what a body should be is distorted into something it physically cannot be yet, and this is incredibly harmful to the psyche of a young child. Furthermore, when you’re someone who is at risk for an eating disorder or are recovering from an eating disorder, it can be especially troubling to come across dieting videos or harmful filters. Bethany Ao (2021) in their article *TikTok is ‘like a trap,’ health experts say as eating disorders among teens rise*, “Because of the way TikTok’s algorithm works, users often see content from creators that they do not follow on their for-you pages, making it hard to avoid triggering content.” Even if someone doesn’t subscribe to the pro-disordered eating videos, they can still come up onto their for-you page. This turns the for-you page from a fun, never ending roll of entertainment to something like a minefield. When someone who has an eating disorder sees a video that contains

dieting and calorie counting, it could send them into a relapse of their ED (eating disorder). This is incredibly dangerous.

Disruptive Impact

The disruptive impact is the accessibility of this content to non-consenting individuals, while it's a price to pay to have access to all of the positive and funny things that Tiktok has to offer, it is a hefty price. For people with eating disorders, this makes the app practically unusable. Its further potential for harm goes beyond those already diagnosed, it spreads to those young kids who have never been exposed to these ideas of dieting and body image and can start something that can last a lifetime. Fortunately, Tiktok has multiple body-positivity and anti-fatphobia campaigns to combat the negative body image the other videos may be inflicting. One of the people who speak truth to body positivity on the app is popstar Lizzo, who in a quote from the article by Twesky (2021) says, “So if you’re feeling down on yourself today just remember that your body is your body, nobody's got your body, so enjoy that b*tch.”

Predictions

I think that in the future, there will be trigger warnings on videos that may be negative to a person's mental health, of all capacities. There are a lot of unfiltered videos on the website, which can be a really fun and entertaining thing, but can also lead to trauma-dumping on strangers. Tiktok already has certain perimeters where you can click 'not interested' when you don't like the content of a video, but this doesn't guarantee anything. The only thing that can make the app safer for those who are in a fragile state of mind is a simple trigger warning screen.

CHANGE IN GOVERNING

Uses and Trends

The summer of 2020 in the world of Tik Tok was full of civil rights, protests, and support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Tiktok served as the way for Gen-Z to collaborate and congregate in ways that they can effect change. According to the article by Mitchell and Shearer (2021), in a Pew Research Center survey from 2020, “About half of U.S. adults (53%) say they get news from social media ‘often’ or ‘sometimes.’” The tragic death of George Floyd came as a catalyst for protest and demand for change. At the frontlines of this movement were teenagers and young adults, participating in protests across the country. Tiktok at this time served as a platform for people to share information, dates and locations of protests, and instructional tools. The platform became a way to spread and amplify Black creators and Black voices. As highlighted in the article by Janfaza (2020), the platform became a place to share personal stories of a movement represented in major news outlets as nothing more than a riot. Janfaza (2020) writes, “Some creators, including TV personality Ruba Wilson, @rubasworld, have used the app to highlight unseen moments from protests around the country. The video shows protesters singing and dancing to Michael Jackson's ‘Man In The Mirror’ and is captioned, ‘The protest the news doesn't want you to see.’” The impact of these videos shared to the platform was to show the peacefulness within the group, and how any violence wasn’t what they were there to accomplish. While the users of the app may have brought the activism to the app, Tiktok has had a bad track record with shadow-banning black creators. While the app claims to not actively shadow ban people, the Black community on Tiktok says otherwise. An article for TIME by Megan McCluskey (2020) quotes Onani Banda, a Tiktok creator,” [Banda] says that after two videos in which she spoke about supporting the Black Lives Matter movement garnered a much lower view count (less than 6,000 to date) than she expected from over 100,000 followers, she discovered that the majority of the views they did get came from Personal Profile clicks.” What

this means is that whoever saw that video had purposely gone to her page to view. They had not seen the video on their for you page because Tiktok hadn't included it into the algorithm.

Nevertheless, the message of equal rights and social justice still spread like wildfire through the app.

Disruptive Impact

The app made it accessible and easy to find information about protests and gather in large groups. It created a network that by the app being a big platform for social justice, it made the app look good in the eyes of representing progressive change, it was just unfortunate that the platform intersected this information outpour. Something brought up in the TIME article is the concept that the shadow banning of black creators may steam further than any fault of the app, but rather, unconscious racism within the content selection of the users.

Predictions

What this all does is, more than anything, start the conversation of race and politics in a very 'for dummies' kind of fashion. The video needs to be crammed into a minute long segment of time, which allows for the young people who are interacting with it to pay attention and understand. What this did for the youth is get them engaged in politics. What this did do in terms of activism by adults is give them a lazy way out, through reposting and living and partaking in performative activism. While this can be pretty lazy and offensive to most people of color, like David Carr says in his article *Hashtag Activism, and Its Limits*, "Sure, hashtags come and go, and the so-called weak ties of digital movements are no match for real world engagement. But they are not only better than nothing, they probably make the world, the one beyond the keyboard, a better place." Like I said earlier, the hashtags and likes, while they aren't real activism, they do open the floor for conversation.

Conclusion

Tiktok has many advantages for many people. As an emerging technology it has shown a lot of perseverance and seems to only be getting stronger. When we look at the ways it has affected young adult's relationship with their image, their friends, members of their age group, their race, and the job market- you can see why the app has taken the world by storm. The biggest prediction that I can make about the technology is that we really need to wait another 5 years and see where it stands. We can ridicule it for the ways it's come up short with it's protection of people from sensitive content, but it's an unfair assessment. Its existence through such a momentous time in all of our lives is memorialized, and I have no doubt the story of Tiktok will live on as a piece of history. While it is popular here and now, I think we can appreciate the way it's become an integral part of young adult culture- as well as a valuable collection of this year's highs and lows in the form of dance trends.

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