

TikTok? The Kesha song?

A person's age can quickly be determined by the first thing they think of when someone says 'TikTok'. If you started singing the 2010 Kesha hit, you're probably a millennial. Was your first thought a clock? Okay, Boomer. Thought about your favourite app, Gen Z. In the few years since its launch TikTok has made its way into the cultural zeitgeist as more and more people have downloaded the app. Young users flocked to TikTok to discover the new trendy app and it has quickly cemented itself as the core of Youth Culture in 2021. The app is a fusion of other Social Media sites to come before it (Abidin, 2019), but to its users, it's very unique. For the most part, the content is authentic, young, funny and tailor-made to their interests. In 2021 TikTok has become the centre of Youth Culture through its user demographics, affordances and ability to uniquely and regularly combine elements of Youth Culture into one place.

A CLOCK APP?

TikTok was first launched in China in 2016 as Douyin. The app then began to enter different markets outside China as TikTok in 2017 (Jennings, 2019). However, it wasn't until TikTok merged with another app Musical.ly in 2018 that it became available globally. All of Musical.ly's users and content were moved to TikTok in the merge (Jennings, 2019). By the end of 2019, TikTok had 508 million monthly users outside of China (Iqbal, 2021). In Q1 of 2020, TikTok was downloaded 315 million times, which is the most downloads in a quarter for any app (Sensortower, 2020). In Q2 of 2020, it was downloaded another 300 million times. The only other apps to ever surpass 300 million downloads in a single quarter are Zoom and Pokémon Go (Iqbal, 2021). 62% of TikTok users in the United States are between the ages of 10 to 29 (Statista, 2020).

TikTok videos are vertical and can be up to 60 seconds long. When a user opens the app they are met with a 'For You Page' which allows them to scroll endlessly through videos that the algorithm thinks they will enjoy. You also have the option to click a button in the top left to navigate through videos of people you follow. This is a key point of difference between TikTok and many other social media platforms, the primary page of the app is not based around the content of people you follow, but rather content TikTok thinks you will enjoy based on previous content you have watched/interacted with. On the bottom of the screen, there is a bar of icons. On the homepage (as described above), the discover menu allows you to see trending hashtags and videos and also allows you to search through the app to find accounts, hashtags, videos and sounds. The middle icon is a plus sign which opens the menu for you to create your own videos. To the right of that is the inbox, which acts similar to a notification centre and then to the very right of the screen is the "me" which takes you to your profile (TikTok, 2020). Users can like, comment, share, save, duet (film their video alongside the original) or stitch (insert another person's video within their own) other creators TikTok's. As well as use sounds created by other users. TikTok allows you to import images and videos into your own TikTok.

Imitation publics are formed across the app (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). Zulli and Zulli define this "as a collection of people whose digital connectivity is constituted through the shared ritual of content imitation and replication." (2020, para. 27). There are two ways imitation publics form on TikTok, the first is through the creation of videos on the app. By using other creators sounds, trends and effects an imitation public is formed. The second way they are formed is through grouping individuals onto 'a side' of TikTok. The different 'sides' of TikTok are a key part of the app's ecosystem. Content is generally split into two categories 'straight TikTok' and 'alt TikTok' (it's also referred to as 'gay TikTok') (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). When you think of TikTok you may think of stereotypically pretty white teenagers lip-syncing to popular songs and creating dances. This is straight TikTok. Alt TikTok is described by Sung as the "...rejects mainstream trends in favour of surreal humour and alternative

aesthetics...alt TikTok embodies all things queer.” (2020, para. 3). The algorithm will place you on either side based on what content you watch and interact with. The more time spent on the app the more time the algorithm has time to learn who you are and what you like to watch (Matsakis, 2020). Identifying as being ‘on’ a particular side of TikTok means that you will the content you will create will align with the characteristics of that side and can be imitated by others on the app (Zulli & Zulli, 2020).

YOUTH CULTURE

Literature on Youth Culture has evolved over time. However, the elements that make Youth Culture seem to not have changed significantly over time. Music, style, vocabulary and civic engagement (Bennett, 2015 and White, n.d.) are fundamental components of Youth Culture. In her research about Mobile Youth Culture, Abeele explained how Youth Culture is crucial in ensuring a smooth move from child to adult. She also discussed how Youth culture allows young people to “express, support and reinforce their autonomy”, “ experiment with and express their identity” and “build and maintain intimate relationships with their peers.” (2016). It has also been suggested that Youth Culture can be seen as “interpretive reproductions” of the society that exists around them (Abeele, 2016). They don’t just reproduce exactly what they witness, they instead “interpret, transform and creatively appropriate elements of it into their own social world” (Abeele, 2016). We see all of these parts of Youth Culture on TikTok. There are always examples on the platform of people enforcing their autonomy over their lives (Merryman, 2020; Smith, 2021), expressing and experimenting with new identities (Roberts, 2019; Gehrman, 2020), as well as building support networks with other users (Parker, 2020; Harvey, 2020). Though the elements of Youth Culture have not changed the spaces in which these elements exist and thrive has changed. Web 2.0 fundamentally changed the way we communicate (Brown, 2009) and over time these elements of Youth Culture went digital. However, they were spread across various platforms. Music plays a big role on YouTube (Edmund, 2012). Style is a part of Instagram and YouTube due to their focus on visual content (Leaver et al., 2020). Civic discussion took place mostly on Twitter and vocabulary existed across all the platforms.

KEY ELEMENTS OF YOUTH CULTURE

Here is an explanation of how each of the key elements of Youth Culture exist on TikTok.

Music

Music is a large part of the platform, not only is there the ability to use music within TikToks, but it’s also a great platform for new and emerging artists to post their music and be discovered by audiences. Doja Cat, Little NAS X and Megan Thee Stallion all utilised TikTok to grow their audiences (Adetoro, n.d.). Megan Thee Stallion’s song Savage became a phenomenon on TikTok midway through last year. The platform announced at the end of 2020 that it had featured in 30 million Tiktok videos (Rolling Stone, 2020). It also allows users to discuss new music, remix, make dances to them and create memes. Users did this with Olivia Rodrigo’s song Drivers License (McManus, 2021; Cohen, 2021; Gutoskey, 2021, Lil Nas X’ music video Montenegro (Call Me by Your Name) (Hill, 2021; Surbano, 2021) and WAP by Cardi B featuring Megan Thee Stallion (Espron, 2020; Doran, 2020).

Style

Fashion videos are prominent on the app (Rose, 2021; Vazzana, 2021). However, the style component of TikTok isn’t just about people showing off their favourite outfits. The visual nature of the app means we get to see what young people are wearing in every video, thus trends catch on quickly. An oversized jumper and tracksuit pants is one of the most popular casual looks for young people right now as worn by Charli and Dixie D’Amelio, two of the biggest creators on the app

(D'amelio, 2020). TikTok has also allowed for fashion styles to pop up through its 'different sides'. Weekman describes them as Cottagecore, Dark Academia, Light Academia, E-girl, Y2K, VSCO girls, Euphoria and 90's nostalgia (n.d.). All distinct styles are popular on their corners of the app.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary and language is a key part of the app. There are different words and phrases that are used in various contexts. Whilst some of them have not originated on the app, their use has become widespread and a part of Gen Z vernacular. Some of these include 'no cap' (meaning no lie), 'and that's on _' (this can be used in any context but it places significance on the last word e.g. 'and that's on private school') or 'it's the _ for me' (this phrase is used to insult someone or yourself e.g. if someone is known as a bad driver you could say it's the driving for me).

Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is very prevalent on the app particularly in times of heightened public discourse surrounding an issue. TikTok has created an environment of little resistance, where users can have these conversations in the creative ways they are already comfortable and familiar with (Abidin, 2019). This means that participating in political movements and discussions has become a normal part of a users experience on the app, rather than something that is only found and limited to particular parts of the internet (Abidin, 2019). This genre of content typically takes two forms. The first is a person educating other users about a topic and the second is videos of protests/marches/movements that are taking place. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement which became the centre of public discussion in mid-2020 also became the centre of content on TikTok. There are videos of People of Colour educating users about various topics (Washington, 2020; Benjy, 2021). There was also a lot of video footage of the protests that were happening globally at the time (Springer, 2020; Rahma, 2020). The way content is spread on the platform means the content is brought this content right to the viewer without them having to search for it.

HOW IS TIKTOK DIFFERENT TO OTHER SOCIAL MEDIA SITES?

To some people, TikTok does not seem to be that different to other social media platforms. However, I would argue there is are a few distinct differences that make it the epitome of Youth Culture. One of the key distinctions is that TikTok truly is the intersection of all the other platforms. The platform is a "mish-mash" (Abidin in Bogle and Edraki, 2019 para. 11) "...with the performativity of Youtube, the scrolling interface of Instagram and the deeply weird humour usually reserved for Platforms such as Vine or Tumblr" (Bogle and Edraki, 2019 para. 11).

Statistics indicate that neither Facebook nor Twitter has large numbers of young people using the platforms regularly (Iqbal, 2021). In 2020, 2% of US teenagers elected Facebook as their favourite social media platform (Iqbal, 2021). In 2018 only 3% of young people elected Twitter as their most-used app (Iqbal, 2021). Therefore, due to the low number of young regular users, I do not believe that either can be the core of Youth Culture in 2021.

Instagram is structured around the interpersonal connections of its users. When someone opens the app they are brought to the feed of users they follow, which is very different to TikTok which is structured around its For You Page (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). A single user may be able to build their own community and following. This happens on TikTok as well but communities are primarily built around similar interests and content rather than a few key people. Thus, I do not believe in 2021 it is the epitome of Youth Culture.

CONCLUSION

TikTok has taken over as the centre of Youth Culture in 2021. Its focus on content rather than interpersonal connections means creativity and memetic processes are allowed to flourish on the app. By placing users in different parts of the app, developers allow users to create and watch content they enjoy. This has allowed for music, style, vocabulary and civic discussion to develop on the app. Youth Culture has existed for many years however, the spaces it occupied have shifted. It will be interesting to see where TikTok goes from this point and how long it will maintain its status as the core of Youth Culture.

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