

TikTok: The Future of Social Media

A short-video app that went viral suddenly is changing the dynamic of entertainment with its algorithm.

By John Herrman

Hello, person who is, statistically speaking, a human adult aged approximately “millennial” to “boomer.” The analytics suggest a high likelihood that you’re aware there is an app named TikTok, and a similarly high likelihood that you’re not totally sure what it’s all about. Maybe you asked someone younger in your life, and they tried to explain and possibly failed. Or maybe you’ve heard that this new, extraordinarily popular video app is “a refreshing outlier in the social media universe” that’s “genuinely fun to use.” Maybe you even tried it, but bounced straight out, confused and sapped.

“Fear of missing out” is a common way to describe how social media can make people feel like everyone else is part of something — a concert, a secret beach, a brunch — that they’re not. A new wrinkle in this concept is that sometimes that “something” is a social media platform itself. Maybe you saw a photo of some friends on Instagram at a great party and wondered why you weren’t there. But then, next in your feed, you saw a weird video, watermarked with a vibrating TikTok logo, scored with a song you’d never heard, starring a person you’d never seen. Maybe you saw one of the staggering number of ads

for TikTok plastered throughout other social networks, and the real world, and wondered why you weren’t at that party, either, and why it seemed so far away.

If we exclude Fortnite, which is very social but also very much a game, the last time an app inspired such interest from people who weren’t on it was ... maybe Snapchat? (Not a coincidence that Snapchat’s audience skewed very young, too.)

And while you, perhaps an anxious abstainer, may feel perfectly secure in your “choice” not to join that service, Snapchat has more daily users than Twitter, changed the course of its industry, and altered the way people communicate with their phones. TikTok, now reportedly 500 million users strong, is not

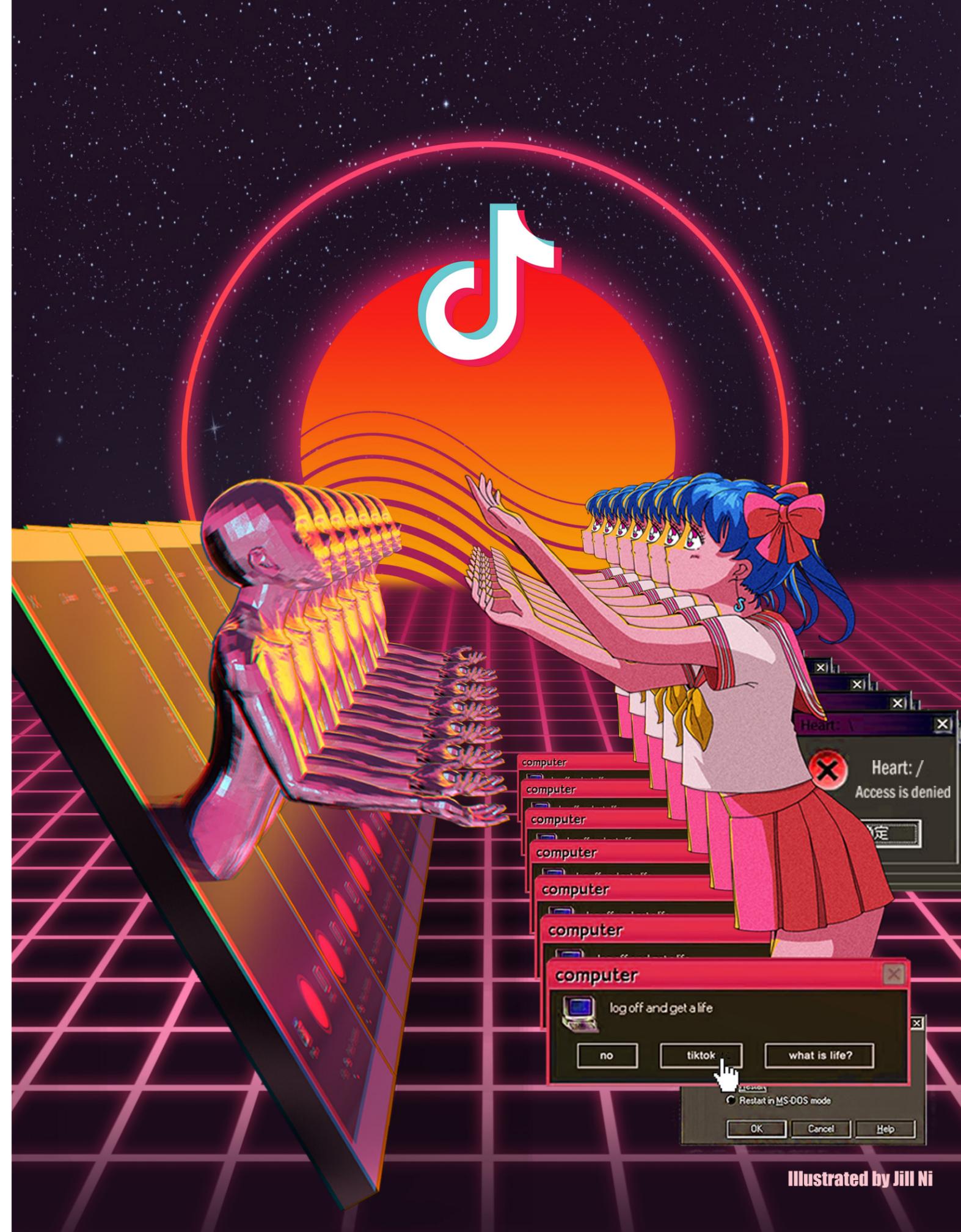
so obvious in its intentions. But that doesn’t mean it doesn’t have them! Shall we?

The basic human explanation of TikTok.

TikTok is an app for making and sharing short videos. The videos are tall, not square, like on Snapchat or Instagram’s stories, but you navigate through videos by scrolling up and down, like a feed, not by tapping or swiping side to side. Video creators have all sorts of tools at their disposal: filters as on Snapchat (and later, everyone else); the ability to search for sounds to score your video. Users are also strongly encouraged to engage with other users, through “response” videos or by means of “duets” — users can duplicate videos and add themselves alongside.

“It’s been a while since a new social app got big enough, quickly enough, to make nonusers feel they’re missing out from an experience.”

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“ *TikTok assertively answers anyone’s what should I watch with a flood. In the same way, the app provides plenty of answers for the paralyzing what should I post?* ”

Hashtags play a surprisingly large role on TikTok. In more innocent times, Twitter hoped its users might congregate around hashtags in a never-ending series of productive pop-up mini-discourses. On TikTok, hashtags actually exist as a real, functional organizing



Illustrated by Jill Ni

principle: not for news, or even really anything trending anywhere else than TikTok, but for various “challenges,” or jokes, or repeating formats, or other discernible blobs of activity.

TikTok is, however, a free-for-all. It’s easy to make a video on TikTok, not just because of the tools it gives users, but because of extensive reasons and prompts it provides for you. You can select from an enormous range of sounds, from popular song clips to short moments from TV shows, YouTube videos or other TikToks.

You can join a dare-like challenge, or participate in a dance meme, or make a joke. Or you can make fun of all of these things.

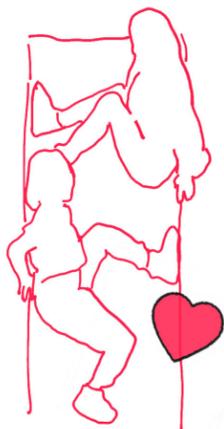
The result is an endless unspooling of material that people, many very young, might be too self-conscious to post on Instagram, or that they never would have come up with in the first place without a nudge. It can be hard to watch. It can be

charming.

It can be very, very funny. It is frequently, in the language widely applied outside the platform, from people on other platforms, extremely “cringe.”

So that’s what’s on TikTok. What is it?

TikTok can feel, to an American audience, a bit like a greatest hits compilation, featuring only the most engaging elements and experiences of its predecessors. This is true, to a point. But TikTok — known as Douyin in China, where its parent company is based —



Illustrated by Tina Tan

must also be understood as one of the most popular of many short-video-sharing apps in that country.

This is a landscape that evolved both alongside and at arm’s length from the American tech industry — Instagram, for example, is banned in China. Under the hood, TikTok is a fundamentally different app than American users have used before. It may look and feel like its friend-feed-centric peers, and you can

can follow and be followed; of course there are hugely popular “stars,” many cultivated by the company itself. There’s messaging. Users can and do use it like any other social app. But the various aesthetic and functional similarities to Vine or Snapchat or Instagram belie a core difference: TikTok is more machine than man. In this way, it’s from the future — or at least a future. And it has some messages for us.

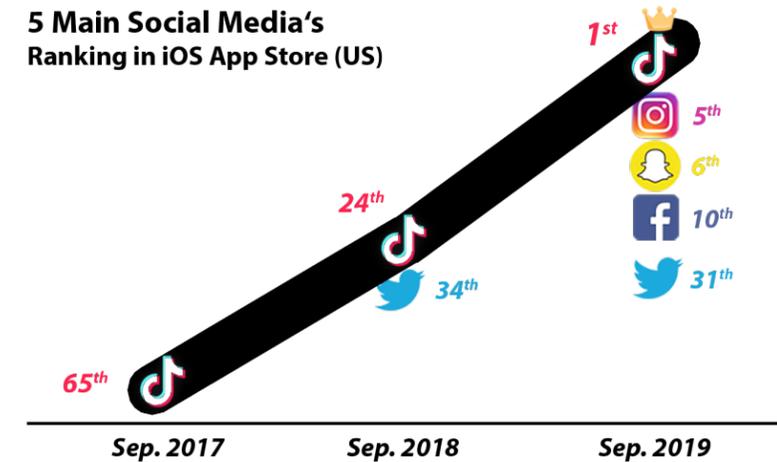
Consider the trajectory of what we think of as the major social apps.

Instagram and Twitter could only take us so far.

Twitter gained popularity as a tool for following people and being followed by other people and expanded from there. Twitter watched what its users did with its original concept and formalized the conversational behaviors they invented. (See: Retweets. See again: hashtags.) Only then, and after going public, did it start to become more assertive. It made more recommendations. It started reordering users’ feeds based on what it thought they might want to see, or might have missed. Opaque machine intelligence encroached on the original system.

Something similar happened at Instagram, where algorithmic recommendation is now a very noticeable part of the experience, and on YouTube, where recommendations shuttle one around the platform in new and often ... let’s say surprising ways. Some users might feel affronted by these assertive

5 Main Social Media’s Ranking in iOS App Store (US)



Data from Qimai Tech
Designed by Thea Chen & Hannah Jiang

new automatic features, which are clearly designed to increase interaction. One might reasonably worry that this trend serves the lowest demands of a brutal attention economy that is revealing tech companies as cynical time-mongers and turning us into mindless drones.

These changes have also tended to work, at least on those terms. We often do spend more time with the apps as they’ve become more assertive, and less intimately human, even as we’ve complained.

What’s both crucial and easy to miss about TikTok is how it has stepped over the midpoint between the familiar self-directed feed and an experience based first on algorithmic observation and inference. The most obvious clue is right there when you open the app: the first thing you see isn’t a feed of your friends, but a page called “For You.” It’s an algorithmic feed based on videos you’ve interacted with, or even just watched. It never runs out of material. It is not, unless you

train it to be, full of people you know, or things you’ve explicitly told it you want to see. It’s full of things that you seem to have demonstrated you want to watch, no matter what you actually say you want to watch.

It is constantly learning from you and, over time, builds a presumably complex but opaque model of what you tend to watch, and shows you more of that, or things like that, or things related to that, or, honestly, who knows, but it seems to work. TikTok starts making assumptions the second you’ve opened the app, before you’ve really given it anything to work with. Its mode of creation is unusual, too. You can make stuff for your friends, or in response to your friends, sure. But users looking for something group challenges, or hashtags, or shown popular songs. The bar is low. The stakes are low. Large audiences feel within reach, and smaller ones are easy to find, even if you’re just messing around. (continued on page 7)