THE POWER OF TIKTOK

“The app that is constantly learning from you, without letting you get bored.”
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WHAT THE F**K IS TIKTOK?
Every era has had its social network. From Myspace in 2005 to Facebook in 2008, passing through Instagram and briefly Snapchat in 2014. If the transition to a new platform is always traumatic, mechanisms such as word of mouth and popularity are the two best weapons to convince even the most reluctant to download the app of the moment on their smartphone. The same has happened with TikTok, the social symbol of Gen Z whose addiction is based, only apparently, on the randomness of an infinite scroll of short videos. Unlike almost every other social network though, TikTok doesn’t base its entire success on followers but instead uses sophisticated artificial intelligence-driven technology to provide users with videos it thinks they want to see.

“TikTok, the social symbol of Gen Z whose addiction is based, only apparently, on the randomness of an infinite scroll of short videos.”
WHAT IS IT AND HOW DOES IT WORK?
The Power of TikTok

HISTORY OF TIKTOK

TikTok was actually born from the merger of two successful apps, Musical.ly and Douyin, bringing together the qualities of both social media in one product. Becoming extremely popular in 2014 among the 13-18 age group, Musical.ly had as its strength the ability to create videos in which users could dance while lip-synching.

Two years later it was Douyin’s turn, the app created by the Chinese company ByteDance as Musical.ly’s rival which, after launching it only in China, debuted on the international market with a new name: TikTok. The last piece of this puzzle, however, comes in 2017, when ByteDance decides to buy Musical.ly for $800 million merging it the following year with TikTok starting the rise of an app that today counts 1 billion monthly active users worldwide.

At the core of TikTok lies the ability to film videos with a mix of music, lip-sync videos, comedy, and lengthy micro-blogging content. The ability to do in-app editing has made it extremely easy and intuitive to capture and share content, while stimulating users’ creativity more than ever. This very element has been key to Tiktok’s success: users have to edit videos by customizing them with visual effects, special filters, sounds, and songs, and the app allows them to do all this within its platform.

A straightforward platform with a design that combines the visual key of Instagram Stories with an infinite vertical scroll that eliminates any unnecessary steps to build an engaging user experience, making the platform a true media entertainment. But those who also use other social networks know that TikTok videos rarely stay on TikTok. Sharing videos outside of the platform was, in fact, a strategic tool used by parent company ByteDance to help promote the emerging app, becoming a social media with a flood of content.

Internal documentation submitted by the company, which dates back to June 2020, indicates that at least 5 million videos are posted per hour.

“...an infinite vertical scroll that eliminates any unnecessary steps to build an engaging user experience, making the platform a true media entertainment.”

The central point is “For you”, a place where the algorithm makes its magic by selecting for the best content based on user activity on the platform, contrary to Instagram and Twitter, where the main page summarizes the latest posts of the followed users, so you are forced to follow accounts. A filter bubble that not even Facebook has ever managed to target so precisely, generating the infinite scrolling that to date is the main advantage of the app.
WHO ARE ITS USERS?

Available in **155 countries** and **75 languages**, between **January 2018** and **July 2020** TikTok saw a **1157.76%** increase in its global base with a **787.86%** growth rate in the **United States** alone. To date, out of **1 billion monthly active users**, half are between **16 and 24 years old**, while **5.4 million** are Italian (Source: We Are Social, 2020). To get an idea of the extent of the TikTok phenomenon, just think that out of 4.8 billion internet users in the world, **20.83%** use TikTok, while out of 4.48 billion active users on social media, **22.32%** use TikTok regularly. According to Sensor Tower’s estimates, TikTok’s total number of downloads reached **3 billion**, making it the most downloaded app in Q1 and Q2 2021.

“...just think that out of **4.8 billion** internet users in the world, **20.83%** use TikTok, while out of **4.48 billion** active users on social media, **22.32%** use TikTok regularly.”
However, the real key to TikTok’s success remains its video algorithm, capable of selecting the content that best suits our tastes and designed around two fundamental principles: making sure that users stay on the platform and making sure they come back. But just as with many other social networks, TikTok’s algorithm represents a means by which the app acquires news about its users, from their musical tastes to their moods; every like and every extra second spent on a video is immediately transformed into new information. Information that can be used to target the user, creating a morbid dependence on a platform capable of quickly understanding the user’s tastes and desires. The final step of this mechanism is the passive fruition of contents in which the user, now targeted by the platform, no longer needs to search for something but is instead put in front of a potentially infinite sequence of videos in line with his previous interactions.

"But just as with many other social networks, TikTok’s algorithm represents a means by which the app acquires news about its users, from their musical tastes to their moods; every like and every extra second spent on a video is immediately transformed into new information."

On that very note, a TikTok employee recently shared with The New York Times a document that offers a rough equation for video scoring, in which a machine learning-driven prediction and actual user behavior are summed for each of the three bits of data: likes, comments, and playtime, as well as an indication that the video has been triggered:

What transpires is that viewing time is the real key to the algorithm, whose ultimate goal is not to give the user what they want but to make them addicted to the content on the platform.
Despite the strength of the algorithm behind TikTok, it is actually the community that is present on social media that is the real driving force behind the platform. A direct reflection of real-life where different ecosystems of people, creators, and drivers of culture interact with each other creating the “next big thing”, it is the community’s power to shift the focus on trends through the content it creates on the platform by entrusting it to the unpredictability which characterizes it. It’s the unpredictability that attracts the user, the constantly changing content, and the anticipation of finding out what’s behind the next scroll.

“It’s the unpredictability that attracts the user, the constantly changing content, and the anticipation of finding out what’s behind the next scroll.”
The Power of Tik Tok
nnss research & development
But when talking about the power of TikTok, one has to analyze the plurality of sectors that are touched and the impact that is created within different industries, from books to music, passing through food and fashion. The music industry, for example, has found in TikTok a golden mine where artists can interact with their fans, transforming the cold relationship of the old social networks into continuous and engaging storytelling. Charlie Puth, for example, used TikTok to tell the genesis of his album turning his new single into a hit before it was even released, while Gayle created direct interaction with her fans to turn “abcdefu” into an international hit. The music industry’s attention for Tiktok is not unfounded and to understand this, it is enough to think that the songs that have become trends on the platform often end up occupying the highest positions on the Billboard 100 or the Spotify Viral 50, while 67% of users who use the app are used to searching on streaming services for songs heard on TikTok. Also for this reason, among the new promotional strategies, there is the creation of agreements between record labels and creators to use some songs on TikTok. “TikTok has become an integrative part in music discovery, connecting artists to their fans and introducing brands to every corner of the community,” said Ole Obermann, TikTok Global Head of Music. Among the sectors conquered by TikTok, there is also the publishing sector that with its hashtag BookTok has reached 10 billion views, creating a real community to exchange book recommendations. This is how the bubble of fans on the platform has been renamed, a promotional weapon with which publishers have managed to unpredictably increase demand, like, for example, Adam Silvera’s 2017 book “They Both Die at the End” rose to the top of the children’s fiction charts in just a few months, selling more than 4,000 copies per week, more than 200,000 copies in the UK, reaching 10.8 million views with the hashtag #adam-silvera. The food industry has also been impacted through TikTok and its partnership with Instacart, the leading online grocery platform in North America. For the first time, people will be able to watch video recipes and immediately order groceries with the right ingredients. The new product comes to life through the “See Recipe” button embedded on videos, making online recipes a reality, quickly getting all the ingredients followers need by becoming the first grocery delivery platform to partner with a social media.
TikTok’s strength is moving industries by becoming a trendsetter capable of ranging from one sector to another. Among them, there is fashion, which since the genesis of the platform has tried in every way to carve out its place. After some first unsuccessful attempts, brands like Balenciaga and Moncler seem to have found their own identity on the social, creating ad hoc content capable of attracting users. But are we sure it’s enough? As Generation Z kids said, “People can get to know a brand on TikTok the same way they know a real person,” said Federico, 19. “The brand story comes to life and the ability to see how a product goes from concept to reality can be communicated to the customer through beautiful and often hilarious content.” But in order to make a product believable, making an advertising message organic, it must necessarily pass through the profiles of the creators. Creators are on the rise and TikTok is increasingly playing a relevant role within the fashion industry. The app has not only proven its track record when it comes to generating interest in products and driving sales, but it has also become a tool for stimulating Gen-Z attention and interest. TikTokers are taking the fashion talk to a new, younger audience by driving the democratization of criticism, making more room for everyone to share their opinion, rather than having monovision from the same big magazines and journalists.

“The possibilities are endless” @carlarockmore, who with over a million followers chronicles fashion from her walk-in closet, has told us. “You can use a trend that’s already popular or you can create one from scratch with your own style. I think the people who have been using the platform the longest are the ones who can really find their own style.” TikTok needs to be understood and brands need guidance to do that.
The Power of TikTok

Luxury brands have yet to grasp the potential of this social media. Last December, Dior chose Twitch to present its Fall 2021 Men’s collection in order to intercept the segment of the audience that seems to be distant and disinterested in the world of luxury. The attempt of Kim Jones’ brand, as well as that of Prada, are the answer to the question of what fashion brands are doing wrong in their approach to the new social platforms: imposing one’s presence is not enough, to really be there one must step into the chosen role and play according to the pre-established rules. If the communication requirements of a fashion brand can be compatible with social networks such as Clubhouse and Only Fans, also tested by realities such as The Attico and Rebecca Min-koff, it is not so obvious that the same can be accessed with TikTok or Twitch.

The key to success is to adapt and change one’s own language, and not vice versa, truly opening oneself up to new things and not merely claiming a place in a reality that perhaps does not belong to them. TikTok has in fact become fashion-trend-driven, as you can see with the 2000s trend. The hashtag #Old Money Aesthetic sums up Gen Z’s interest in a world that is not always focused, indeed often very nebulous, built on an aesthetic that makes its declared timelessness its hallmark. So much that too many trends have come out. According to the TikToker @thedigifairy, following this speed “the trend cycle may collapse”. The collapsing trend is largely due to fast-fashion brands like Shein producing new clothing styles at lightning speed and then promoting them through shopping sprees advertised on TikTok, so now micro-trends no longer last three to five years but disappear in a matter of months.

The constant turnover of aesthetics across eras and decades that dominates society’s collective consciousness will therefore put the creative industry up against a wall, leaving us alone with the present. In addition to being a trend-driven social, TikTok is also a hub to discover new fashion talents, in fact new fashion creators, designers and stylists had the chance to find a platform to share their creations and their voice, creating new collaborations and democratizing fashion for a wider audience. Gaming and social apps like TikTok are presenting new opportunities and collaborations for brands, with deals ranging from simple licensing, marketing and product partnerships creating new long-term revenue streams around in-game shopping, branded tertiary spaces and virtual fashion collections. It is becoming as important for fashion to have a presence in the virtual realm as it was at real-life festivals or sports stadiums. And it’s not just fashion that’s encroaching on gaming; esports personalities are also moving into fashion, such as retired League of Legends player Yan Jun-Ze in China, who has launched his own line of streetwear. The playing field for new opportunities is wide open.

Community gaming platform Roblox has just launched a beta feature that allows users to develop private locations to host special functions or events - something that could appeal to the fashion industry’s penchant for creating exclusive spaces and gatherings.
VALUES BEHIND 
TIKTOK - Generation TikTok

A 13 questions survey was sent to the nss community, gathering the answers of 120 young people, between 15 and 25 years old, the age group of the so-called Generation Z. The questions asked left room for young people to answer freely, in complete transparency, obtaining qualitative and quantitative results. In addition to the Generation Z, we analyzed change from new agencies that are monitoring young TikTokers. According to them, the power of TikTok lies in the presence of real content, without too many constructions, with a layout that allows users to scroll through all the endless content on which we are so dependent. “These are in fact the true representation of the new Generation’s values, which constantly lead to the desire to discover new worlds and new sectors”, as WSC told us. This social media, in addition to the layout and its contents, has allowed to make tangible several aspirations, giving space to the creators to maintain his own personality, founding an authentic community able to interact with more realities.

“Always changing is the value that best represents Generation Z, a challenge that keeps alive the curiosity and the desire to discover new worlds and sectors.”

QUALITATIVE & QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH
**The Power of TikTok**

**What is the Social Media You Use the Most?**
- Instagram: 83
- TikTok: 23
- YouTube: 4
- Twitter: 6
- WhatsApp: 8
- Tinder: 1

**Rank Your Top Three Most Used Social Media:**
out of 120 answers
TikTok was mentioned 91 times

**What Do You Like the Most About This Social?**
- TikTok:
  - The democratic approach and various amateur contents
- Instagram:
  - The possibility of being in contact with people and sharing everyday life moments
- YouTube:
  - Learn new things and the variety of videos
- Twitter:
  - Always being up-to-date
- WhatsApp:
  - Quick interaction with people
- Tinder:
  - Illusion

**What Do You Think About TikTok?**
- “It’s an alternative to Instagram to find a lot more miscellaneous content without having to follow or search for it.”
- “TikTok is closer to everyone, TikTok is more real.”
- “TikTok is a bit like YouTube 10 years ago.”
- “The thing I like the most is the extremely personalized experience and the funny, modern and liberal community.”
- “Because it can easily reach all generations, providing content suitable for every need, but above all it has the ability to entertain.”
- “The social network where I can best share my personality”
- “The algorithm studies every profile and useful things come out. Example: I saw a trim on TikTok and included it in my tailoring exam project.”
The Power of TikTok

Values Behind TikTok

**DO YOU HAVE A TIKTOK ACCOUNT?**

- Active: 32
- Passive: 51
- Don't have a TikTok account: 27

Out of 120 answers

**WHY DO YOU THINK TIKTOK HAS BEEN ABLE TO GROW SO FAST?**

- On TikTok the perfect life mask that's on Instagram falls apart and makes people feel more comfortable.

- Has given voice to small communities that have a hard time getting out on Instagram.

**HAS TIKTOK SUBTRACTED TIME FROM YOUR INSTAGRAM USE?**

- Decreased: 63
- Stayed the same: 59

**HAVE YOU EVER BOUGHT SOMETHING YOU SAW ON TIKTOK?**

- Yes: 78
- No: 44

**HAVE YOU EVER BOUGHT SOMETHING YOU SAW ON INSTAGRAM?**

- Yes: 77
- No: 43

The video format is much more appealing than the image.
The Power of TikTok

The next generation have translated their activism completely online. “Not Waiting on the World to Change” found that in 2021, 57% of 13-39 year olds believe they have the power to change things in the real world if they make enough noise online, while 42% of 13-39 year olds have used a hashtag on social media to support a social movement. While these generations were once accused of “slacktivism” activism with little effort, for their social media powered social good efforts, they have been witness to those online efforts and movements that have led to real change in the real world. So TikTok has succeeded in creating a community of crucial activists who have raised awareness about issues untouched on other platforms, bringing accountability and change to the real world. By now, youth identities are at the forefront on TikTok compared to other social, as the app is naturally lending itself to rallying young consumers around social issues and exposing inequality. Given that we’re experiencing one of the largest civil rights movements in history, a global pandemic, and an ongoing climate emergency, it’s not surprising that Gen Z is also using TikTok as a political tool. Issues like the #StopAsianHate movement, climate change, and LGBTQ+ rights have been prominent on the app, and examples of young users organizing to create real-world change have been on the rise. It’s interesting to analyze how micro activism and controversies arise directly on TikTok, all of this because sometimes racism and bad comments are ignored but thanks to the community you manage to make a real change. This social in a short time has managed to drive real changes, starting from the online to the real, offline. Because of this, activism in the app is gaining tremendous power over political and social movements, completely translating the way we protest to create change.

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"Not Waiting on the World to Change"
TikTok’s strongest activism during this time of geopolitical crisis is the activism and “reportage” broadcast online to show the cruelty and discomfort experienced during this time of war. These videos speak to TikTok users in their own language, and the most popular among them can serve as a powerful form of information. These tiny screens have become the televisions that instantly broadcast video and information. The ability to share TikTok videos on other platforms also means that videos are seen by many more users. For example, one of Vasyuta’s TikTok videos showing bombs dropping on Kiev has been viewed 44 million times and shared nearly 200,000 times.

In addition to themes of social change, research shows that the increased use of TikTok and other social media can lead to negative effects; cyberbullying, social exclusion, and drama occurring on these platforms have been associated with mental health issues in adolescents. This is why TikTok in 2021 wanted to train the algorithm to recognize and break content patterns on negative topics such as extreme diets and sadness. This process has been analyzed by experts in medicine and psychology with the aim of offering a limited amount of content, avoiding those that could harm the user’s mental health.

“\textit{It’s like on TikTok the perfect life mask you find on Instagram falls out and making people feel more comfortable.}”

Alice, 21 anni
TikTok might or might not be the social media of the future but for sure its approach is moving into decentralization. The platform is an open space for creators, where creativity and innovation are key elements. Everyone is free to be themselves as youngster Gen Z said “on TikTok you are comfortable to be you”. Moreover, TikTok is the first social platform truly open to other apps. It allows you to easily and directly share videos uploaded on the social, creating bridges to involve users of other apps. From these values, TikTok is slowly approaching Web3.0 by introducing NFTs as a new creator empowerment tool and partnering with Audius, a music streaming platform based on the Ethereum and Solana blockchains. Inspired by the creativity of TikTokers, the social media have dropped their first-ever NFT collection called “TikTok Top Moments”. Aiming to provide a way for creators to be recognized and rewarded for their content and give the possibility for fans to own a culturally-significant moment. The NFTs are designed by some of the creator community who have collected all trending videos they have made. The NFTs are available on Ethereum and are powered by Immutable X, which uses StarkWare’s innovative technology to create the first carbon-neutral Layer-2 scaling solution. Furthermore as mentioned before TikTok has partnered with Audius, a music streaming platform, by adding a new bottom called “TikTok Sounds” library. The collaboration is the first of its kind and aims to streamline TikTok’s current music upload and selection process, giving the artists on Audius a chance to increase their exposure. Infact, Audius users are now able to simply upload tracks and share them to TikTok. “Having the ability to share my uploads straight from Audius to TikTok is a real time saver.” shared Guy Lawrence of Disclosure, an EDM duo that uses Audius to stream music.

“...TikTok is the first social platform truly open to other apps. It allows you to easily and directly share videos uploaded on the social, creating bridges to involve users of other apps.”
MAIN TAKEAWAYS

TikTok is the app that, through its strategic layout, in just a few years has managed to grow exponentially and now has 1 billion monthly active users worldwide.

The algorithm is TikTok’s pivotal element, having the ability to propose new and constantly changing content, fully representing Generation Z’s values.

It has the power to move various sectors like the music industry where all the trending songs found on the platform often end up occupying the highest positions on the Billboard 100 or the Spotify Viral 50; or the publishing industry which, through the hashtag #BookTok, has managed to generate 10 billion views, creating a real community for exchanging book recommendations.

TikTok has succeeded in democratizing the fashion industry through information content and videos that have given a voice to brands and new ideas that would not have had their own space. This trend-driven social has managed to completely change the duration of the various fashion trends, before the micro-trends lasted between three and five years now they disappear in a few months.

Through qualitative and quantitative research conducted among the Gen Z youth, it was discovered that over 70% have downloaded TikTok, identifying it as the ultimate social for freedom of expression, where authenticity and transparency are key elements.

TikTok through its sub communities is able to generate online mobilizations that do not follow the traditional canons of physical protests. This has given rise to what is called "TikTok activism", where 42% of people between 13-25 years old use hashtags to express dissent and succeed in creating real change.
GLOSSARY

ALGORITHM
A series of actions or commands, given some input, with the ultimate goal of producing a result called an output. In computing, it is the evaluation of data, such as likes, in order to produce a result like a recommendation on new content.

BLOCKCHAIN
Network of shared and "immutable" data, a digital ledger whose entries are grouped into "blocks", immutable through the use of cryptography, concatenated in chronological order.

BYTEDANCE
It is a Chinese IT company based in Beijing and founded by Zhang Yiming in 2012.

COMMUNITY
Group of Internet users who exchange messages and participate in discussion forums on topics of common interest.

GENERATION Z
We refer to the generation born between 1995 and 2010, whose members are generally children of Generation X and the late Baby Boomers.

TOV
Tone of voice is how a company communicates its personality using text, video or photos.

USER
Those who use a public good or service and can create and access email accounts and social media platforms.

WEB 3.0
It is a "version" of a decentralized internet, which relies on machine learning, artificial intelligence (AI) and blockchain technology giving users more control over their online data.

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Special thanks
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