

From Lip-Syncing and Dancing to Personal Expression and Short Videos Galore:
How TikTok is Disrupting and Changing the World as We Know It

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04:189:353:93 Digital Technology & Disruptive Change

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In September 2016, Beijing-based company ByteDance launched a social media platform called A.me, which was focused on video-sharing. A.me was rebranded Douyin before the end of the year and was launched as TikTok in the international market in September 2017. On November 10th, 2017, ByteDance acquired the Chinese social media service Musical.ly, and merged it into their social media platform, TikTok. With the tens of millions of users worldwide from Musical.ly, TikTok quickly rose to become one of the world's most popular social media platforms. It's no doubt that TikTok has changed many of our lives, especially during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, where many in-person activities had been radically changed. It has become a platform for creating, sharing, and connecting. But one question we've not really asked about the platform is "how has TikTok disrupted and changed the world as we know it?". It's a big question to ask, and it's almost certain that one does not think about this while using TikTok to look at cute cat videos or people dancing to music clips. However, it's an interesting question to answer, as TikTok really has changed and disrupted many aspects of our lives and society. Some for the better, while other are for the worse. Here, we will take a deep look and analyze various aspects of our lives changed and disrupted by technology, including the development of relationships, as well as work, governing, and social institutions.

Change in Development of Relationships

Use & Trends:

Like many social media platforms, TikTok is a platform used to create and share content with friends, family, and the world abroad. According to an Insider News article that includes a discussion with Santa Monica-based psychiatrist Kathryn Moore on social media in general, "social media allows people to connect in ways that wouldn't otherwise be possible, and can

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often expand people's social circles... For example, in your daily routine, you might not interact with many people who share a life circumstance with you, or are dealing with specific challenges, like being a new parent or moving to a new country. On social media, you can connect with those people in similar situations and share worries, fears, and celebrations...” (Burch, 2020). It should be noted that this article was written in March 2020, when TikTok’s popularity was skyrocketing. However, many of the concepts discussed in the article can be applied to TikTok and how it’s users can develop relationships.

Disruptive Impacts:

Also like many social media platforms, TikTok has disrupted the way we develop these relationships. In Chapter 7 of Chayko’s *Superconnected: The Internet, Digital Media, and Techno-Social Life*, Chayko says that people both on and off social media in general, “people often act in ways that allow them to build what is called common ground with one another. People want to understand one another and to be understood; they want to see something of themselves in one another” (Chayko, 2018). This can be seen as an ongoing two-way interaction. However, with TikTok, some interactions may be one-sided with one-side not acting to build a common ground or not even recognizing or acknowledging someone else’s attempts to build a common ground. This is called a parasocial relationship. An article from Metro talks about this with a specific TikTok where a young woman surprised her boyfriend at his college. In the TikTok, the boyfriend, dubbed ‘Couch Guy’ by viewers, is seen reacting to his girlfriend’s surprise visit (laurenzarras, 2021). Some viewers misinterpreted the reaction as less than enthusiastic and harshly judging the relationship, however the boyfriend came out with a response, criticizing people for their nosiness. According to the Metro article that featured this

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TikTok and the fan interaction, TikTok “helps foster this immediate sort of intimacy, with many influencers documenting their day-to-day lives for their followers to see and engage with. By looking at a camera and addressing the viewer directly, observers may feel as if they have a genuine dialogue with an influencer, despite it being entirely one-sided” (Bond, 2021). While all social media platforms are guilty of fostering these parasocial relationships, TikTok has been a big contributor to it since it has started, as there are many young people on the platform both creating and viewing content that may not be able to tell the difference between these relationships. This is a clear disruption of the development of relationships that Chayko describes earlier.

In addition, like many other social media platforms, TikTok may create a fantasized and misleading depiction of relationships. Social media in general can also, “can negatively affect relationships when you start comparing yourself to other people, including your friends, just based on their social media accounts... for example, some may fear their lives aren't as good as their friends' and withdraw from friendships because they feel they're not good enough” (Burch, 2020) according to Insider. This disrupts how relationships development and maintain that development.

Predictions:

As stated by Metro.co.uk and director of psychology at the University of Essex, Dr. Veronica Lamarche, these disruptions in the development of relationships “will continue to exist as long as we have media and access to information about other people’s lives. Even though it might sound funny that we build connections with people we’ve technically never met or interacted with, it is a perfectly normal and common phenomenon, and engaging with these

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bonds is associated with lots of positive psychological outcomes too” (Bond, 2021). So, unless something changes with TikTok or social media in general, there are no foreseen changes with the way TikTok disrupts the development of relationships. However, TikTok, like other social media platforms, brings people with similar interests together, and that is something that is not expected to change either.

Change in Work:

Use & Trends:

Social media in general can be used to share about an individual’s work life, as well as what they do. One example of people showing their work is TikTok user thepackman123, an Amazon worker who packages boxes at an unprecedented speed with superhuman precision. One of their videos shows the worker packaging fidget toys at a rapid pace, and even playing with one (thepackman123, 2021). With videos like these, TikTok “enables strangers to share aspects of their working lives in a way that has never been seen before, bringing viewers up close with their industries for a personal peek behind the scenes”

TikTok can also be used to promote someone’s work or to help someone do their job. The Press of Atlantic City meteorologist Joe Martucci is a prime example of this. He shares weather information on his TikTok account, and even presents the day’s weather with “suitcasts”, short videos showing his choice of dress ware (usually visual variations of a suit and tie) and what that symbolizes for the day’s weather. One example is from October 25th, 2021, where he wears a black suit jacket, a light blue dress shirt, and a lightning tie to symbolize severe weather and flash flooding, which he also conveys with weather graphics in the background and the ACDC song “Thunderstruck” as the audio for the TikTok (Martucci, 2021).

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Finally, companies can also use TikTok to promote their products or services. There are many examples, but one with prominent impacts is Dunkin and their collaboration with TikTok celebrity Charlie D'Amelio. Their TikTok collaboration shows up in the real world as well, as Dunkin signed a long-term sponsorship with D'Amelio. Dunkin even named a drink after the TikTok celebrity called 'The Charli'. The release of the drink "led to a 57% rise in daily app downloads on launch day and a 45% rise in cold brew sales the day after launch" (mediakix, 2021). This is a perfect example of a company collaborating with a rising social media star and benefiting from it.

Disruptive Impacts:

Some successful companies have become successful through good management practices. According to Clayton Christensen in *The Innovator's Dilemma*, "well-managed companies often fail because the very management practices that have allowed them to become industry leaders also make it extremely difficult for them to develop the disruptive technologies that ultimately steal away their markets" (Christensen, 2014). While there have not been many, if any, examples of TikTok directly disrupting a company, the platform has been a source of disruption for openness in the workplace. Anthony Piloseno, known as tonesterpaints on TikTok, made TikToks of him mixing paint at his job at Sherwin-Williams, sometimes with things that are not traditionally mixed with paint. This caught the attention of company executives, which made the decision to fire Piloseno for breaching policy agreements.

Piloseno, who had been paying for the paint with his own money, said in an interview with BuzzFeed that he had reached out to the Sherwin-Williams marketing department about a possible deal with the company for his TikToks that could bring the company potential

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advertising. He said, “I emailed [the marketing contact] about two or three times, I even reached out to him on LinkedIn. It took two months to get a response from him. He basically told me that there wasn't really any promotions going on so there wasn't a need to see the presentation” (Chen, 2020). Sherwin-Williams’ failure to capitalize on Piloseno’s TikTok account, which had amassed millions of views, portrayed the company as “a dinosaur. Instead of embracing the ideas and creativity of an employee-influencer, it ignored his attempts to contact the marketing department and have his ideas heard... His innovations might have benefited the company” (Schuman, 2020). Examples like this show well-managed companies can be impacted by disruptive technologies, like TikTok, as it shakes up the norm companies are used to.

Predictions:

In terms of TikTok’s disruptive impacts, companies may need to change their policies regarding employee social media usage and sharing content related to the workplace. This may serve beneficially for companies, as people sharing content about their jobs can serve as free advertising for their companies. Some areas of the workforce may see an increase or decrease in people interested with people sharing more of their work lives. We may even see companies promoting jobs using TikTok.

Change in Governing:

Use & Trends:

Like many social media platforms, TikTok is used to talk about politics and promote certain political ideologies. According to a *The New York Times* article, which features an interview with a panel of professors of communication regarding political expression on TikTok, one professor said the following:

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“Something that’s pretty special about TikTok in terms of both political expression and political dialogue/conflict is that it’s all filtered through young people’s personal identities and experiences. Political dialogue on the platform is very personal, and youth will often state diverse social identities — e.g. Black, Mexican, L.G.B.T.Q., redneck, country — in direct relation to their political views. Not to say that political talk on other social media platforms is not personal, but having done comparative analyses, we’re really struck by just how front-and-center youth identities are on TikTok” (Herrman, 2020).

Overall, TikTok allows people to share their political views and personal experiences, while also listening to other people’s political views and personal experiences. In some cases, a healthy political discussion can be carried out.

However, unlike many social media platforms, TikTok bans political and advocacy advertising using its platform. According to NBC News, “TikTok announced [on October 3rd] that it is banning all political ads, a move that sets it apart from other social media platforms that have become destinations for political ad dollars” (Otero-Ahmad, 2019).

Disruptive Impacts:

Within the political landscape, TikTok has been particularly disruptive. In particular, the Trump administration attempted to ban the social media app from United States app stores because of the relationship between TikTok’s parent company, ByteDance, and the Chinese Communist Party. In Executive Order 13942, signed by President Trump on August 6, 2020, Trump banned TikTok from being available to US citizens, citing the following:

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“TikTok automatically captures vast swaths of information from its users, including internet and other network activity information such as location data and browsing and search histories. This data collection threatens to allow the Chinese Communist Party access to Americans' personal and proprietary information—potentially allowing China to track the locations of Federal employees and contractors, build dossiers of personal information for blackmail, and conduct corporate espionage” (Exec. Order No. 13942, 2020).

This ban is most likely due to “the platform [presenting] a new opportunity for disinformation. In January [2020], TikTok announced that it was banning disinformation campaigns on its platform -- though its enforcement could be a different story. After the ban, researchers still found disinformation on TikTok related to coronavirus, spreading conspiracy theories about the public health crisis and its origins,” (Ng, 2020) according to CNet. While the ban on TikTok did not come into fruition, it does raise an interesting question: what information does TikTok collect on its users? Unfortunately, TikTok, like many big social media platforms, is not transparent about what personal information they collect on their users and what they do with that information.

Predictions:

As we use social media in general more often, these questions will be raised, and we'll start to be more cognizant of the true cost of using free platforms like TikTok. Perhaps it becomes an actual paid service where personal information isn't collected, if it truly is. Maybe it remains as it is now. This is a little harder to predict, as this is an ongoing topic of interest that doesn't have a clear-cut solution yet.

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Change in Social Institutions:

Use & Trends:

While TikTok was built as a social media platform, it has become more than that. In some cases, TikTok can be used to teach or learn concepts in a condensed fashion. One such example is a TikTok from user tiff_tiffa, who is also meteorologist. In this TikTok, she talks about what rapid intensification is and what it means for a tropical cyclone, in particular for Hurricane Ida at the time of recording (tiff_tiffa, 2021). TikTok is even being used in the classroom. According to Tech & Learning, “TikTok lesson plans are popular now as a way to help students engage in and beyond the classroom. For a history class, as an example, students can create 15-second video clips that succinctly summarize key points learned on a topic. This helps students to condense and simplify their thoughts, making the lesson easy to remember. But since these can be shared, it also means other students can learn from their videos” (Edwards, 2021).

Another multi-use of TikTok’s platform is to provide current news. One example news on TikTok is Yahoo News providing a snippet of a press conference with Department of State spokesman Ned Price, who states that all travelers entering the United States will need to show proof of COVID-19 vaccination (Yahoo News, 2021).

Disruptive Impacts:

Overall, TikTok is being reimagined as not only a social media and entertainment platform, it can also be a source of information and education. This a classic case of using a technology in a way the inventor of it did not intend it to be used. As stated by Chayko in “We should keep in mind as we reflect on the history of information and communication technology

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that technology is shaped as much by those who adopt and use it as by its official inventors.

Many technologies end up being used in very different fashions than their creators imagined” (Chayko, 2018).

Because of the use of TikTok’s platform to provide education and news, people and organizations are rethinking the way they present information. A study was conducted in October of 2020 by researchers at the Universidade de Santiago de Compostela to explore content covered by news media and programs on TikTok around the world. According to the paper, “the results point to a progressive incorporation of the media since 2019, with the purpose of informing, positioning their brand and adapting to the logic of TikTok in a new approach to journalism for younger generations” (Vazquez-Herrero et. Al, 2020).

The way we teach and train people is also being rethought in a more modern lens. Another study conducted by doctors and researchers from the Society for Academic Emergency Medicine to see if TikTok was a viable tool for teaching content, specifically medicine and public health. The study concluded that “TikTok offers significant benefits for public health and medical education. In an age where the use of social media is becoming more pervasive in our lives, the medical community should consider harnessing the unique characteristics of TikTok to deliver information to patients as well as for targeted training for medical education” (Comp et al, 2020).

Predictions:

As we rethink how we can present information, there could very well be a total shift towards content like the kind we see on TikTok. We could also see education plans and courses

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in the format of TikToks. We could also see traditional media being condensed into a TikTok-like format that meets the attention span of future generations.

Conclusion:

To wrap up all of this info, TikTok has indeed changed many facets of our lives. TikTok is changing how we develop relationships, bringing us closer in some instances and opening the door for unhealthy relationship behaviors in other instances. TikTok is also changing the work place, as people share more about their work lives and companies promote their products and services. TikTok is also changing politics and raising questions about governing. Finally, TikTok is being reimagined to rework how we present news and educational information, and even training information for critical jobs. It leaves one to wonder, what can't be done with TikTok? As technology rapidly evolves and is imagined and reimagined all over, we'll almost certainly see what the final frontier for TikTok is in our lifetime.

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