



ABOVE: *Many dances have been popularized by Tiktok, including the woab and crip walking*

PHOTOS BY NINA LAVEZZO-STECOPOULOS

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GENERATION.

TIKTOK GENERATION

By Jesse Hausknecht-Brown and Nina Lavezzo-Stecopoulos

POV: Gen Z downloaded TikTok as a joke. Now dances, audios, and challenges cross borders to unite over 500 million teens, gays, grandmas, teachers, and cosplayers. It also unites people in the lunch line.

“I was singing a TikTok song and doing a dance just to joke with my friends and some girl I didn’t [know] turned around,” Mia Cacho ’20 said. “She’s like, ‘Why you so obsessed with me...?’ and continued it. I was like, ‘Oh, my God.’”

Kembrew McLeod, a professor of Communication Studies at the University of Iowa, attributes TikTok’s sudden success to lack of video, and music-based social media platforms after the downfall of Vine.

“There was a real vacuum after Vine went away for the kind of video presentations that Vine did and TikTok now does,” McLeod said.

Jackson Ernst ’20 spends an hour every day watching TikToks.

“Honestly, [TikTok] is entertainment for me,” Ernst said. “It’s like watching Netflix. Instead of playing video games or watching Netflix, I’m looking at TikTok.”

The short videos presented by TikTok are perfect entertainment, as the human attention span, on average, has fallen from 12 seconds in 2000 to eight seconds in 2016.

“TikTok is becoming so popular that like when you hang out with your friends you’re like, ‘Let’s make a TikTok to kill some time.’ That’s how entertaining it is,” Cacho said.

Although the app is addressed as a form of entertainment by most teens, and it may seem like there are better things to do than use TikTok, McLeod argues that it is a uniquely innovative outlet for teens to learn how to edit videos.

“I’ve seen a lot of TikTok videos that in-

volve editing and really creative, funny, interesting uses of juxtapositions,” McLeod said. “I don’t think the kids using and making TikTok videos are wasting their time.”

Beyond a creative outlet, TikTok also allows people to find communities.

“I feel like as a community, it’s really open to anything,” Cacho said. “You know a majority of people won’t judge you. [There are] cosplayers, POV, and the LGBT community. [On TikTok] there’ll be old, old ladies that are 80 and dancing in their kitchen. And TikTok’s like, ‘Yes! Go!’ They’re hyping her up.”

But not everybody on TikTok sees old ladies on their ‘For You’ page. While there is a wide variety of content on TikTok, users will only see specific videos on their ‘For You’ page, determined by the TikTok’s algorithm.

“I didn’t really understand the concept of [TikTok], but I kept scrolling,” Cacho said. “It became addicting. It never ends. It never ends.”

Beyond customizing users’ feeds, TikTok’s algorithm allows for previously-unknown people like Elliot Eastwood, an Australian teenager, to go viral within days. Eastwood has 25,800 followers on TikTok under the username @fruboyelliott and gained fame after making TikToks involving nature and face paint.

“I never expected to go anywhere on the app, I just thought it was fun,” Eastwood said. “Before making TikToks I would just be bored in my room, either watching Netflix or playing video games. This was way more productive and left me feeling happy.”

Ernst went viral after posting a video with a fellow City High football player. The video he posted got over 100,000 likes and as of now he has 8,360 followers, but Ernst doesn’t think TikTok fame is all it’s cracked up to be.



278.9K



2091



10.4K

“[Being TikTok famous] is not as rewarding as people think,” Ernst said. “It’s cool and whatever. It’s a flex, but it’s really not that cool. It’s a lot of work if you want to try and stay popular.”

Eastwood, on the other hand, felt excited when he was hit with a wave of follow requests and likes. He was a shy kid who would get bullied in school but became more outgoing after getting famous on TikTok.

“For some reason, I just felt a lot more confident,” Eastwood said. “I wouldn’t say I got an ego or the fame got to my head, but I felt so much more confident than I used to.”

The ability to suddenly become even a little bit famous draws many people to the app. But the sensation of fame felt strange to Ernst.

“It definitely feels weird that almost a million people have seen me that I don’t know,” Ernst said. “Anyone can see a video you made and you don’t really have control over how many people see it. It was crazy that people I didn’t know were tagging me and looking up to me as someone cooler. And I just think that’s weird.”

The key behind Ernst and Eastwood’s success is unknown to even the most avid TikTok user. Unlike most social media platforms, TikTok keeps its algorithm secret and has yet to comment on it.

“I think all social media companies and Google should be much more transparent about how their algorithms work because that impact[s] what news we access just through keyword searches if we’re looking for something,” McLeod said. “We’re using Google News and it knows about us, and it’s pushing certain news articles towards us and not pushing other sorts of information towards us.”

Another concern that has circulated in the media recently is the fact that TikTok is a Chinese-owned company that is both taking

data from its users and censoring certain videos that don’t align with the Chinese government’s political views.

“Whether or not it’s a foreign-owned company, the idea of misinformation being distributed on social media in ways that can persuade people, and in really emotional ways, is something that we always need to be thinking about when we’re using these kinds of media,” McLeod said.

There is some political content on TikTok, which could have something to do with its Chinese owners, but most of the videos on this app center around self-deprecating humor. Instead of talking about their issues in real life, TikTok allows users to figure out their problems by watching 15-second videos that make fun of them.

“[TikTok] is so relatable in the way it really attacks you,” Cacho said. “It’s really comforting seeing that other people are using the app to express and address their own problems in a humorous way.”

McLeod compares TikTok to MySpace, explaining that they are both social media platforms driven by music. Because of MySpace’s downfall, McLeod predicts that TikTok will need to add new features to keep its audience engaged if it doesn’t want to fade away in the next few years.

“[TikTok] is kind of a one-trick pony,” McLeod said. “The company will need to figure out how to add additional features and other things that will keep users coming back because after another year or two, the novelty of that kind of short video is going to wear out and people will move on to the next thing.”

