

[aha.substack.com /p/2-taking-a-byte-out-of-tiktok](https://aha.substack.com/p/2-taking-a-byte-out-of-tiktok)

#2. Taking a Byte out of TikTok

Neer Sharma

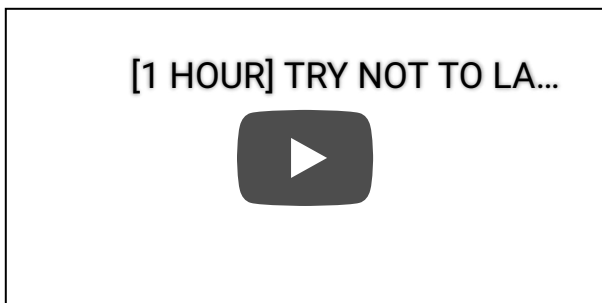
11-13 minutes



If you don't want to relive the history of Vine, skip this

Almost 3 years to the day Twitter shut Vine down, its founder has brought it back to life in the form of [Byte](#).

If you don't remember, Vine was a community of creators sharing 6-second looping videos:



At that time of the Vine acquisition, Twitter was still trying to figure out its positioning versus Facebook. It was grappling with investors comparing the two platforms based on user-growth numbers. And both platforms were thinking very much about video - only 6 months after the Vine launch, Instagram launched video.

Vine effectively gave Twitter a big head-start in the race for social-platforms to nail video:

- at its peak, it apparently had an audience of 200 million people
- it was giving rise to genuine creative influencers who were building huge followings and monetising it (Logan Paul apparently charged \$200k for one creative campaign)

- it was becoming a home for overlooked sub-cultures and giving them global exposure ([especially for Black comedians - remember 'Why you always lyin?'](#))

Fast forward a few years, the narrative around Vine suddenly changed. The story of its decline typically goes like this:

1. Instagram launched video in June 2013 - the greater flexibility of 15 seconds, the exposure of the explore screen, and the focus on amassing followers resulted in more creators moving away from Vine
2. Twitter couldn't monetise Vine at a time when Twitter was trying to build out its monetisation capabilities and ad-platform. Influencers were being paid directly by brands and Vine wasn't taking any cuts from those transactions. Twitter shifted its focus elsewhere.
3. [Musical.ly](#) launched in 2014 and was getting traction from young teens with its focus on performance around music, dance and lip-syncing
4. Personnel changes at Vine couldn't turn around the death-spiral of creators shifting away and eye-balls shifting away

Vine shutting down was a sad moment in Internet History.

It had its moment. It was genuinely diverse. It unleashed creativity and memes at a velocity the internet hadn't seen.

But the most compelling part of Vine's story has been the subsequent rise of TikTok.

Since Vine shutdown, TikTok - post acquisition of [Musical.ly](#) - has grown to global domination.

With TikTok also focusing on short-looping videos, it begs the following questions:

- [was Vine too ahead of its time?](#)
- [did Twitter squander a goldmine of an opportunity?](#)
- [could Vine have become TikTok-scale?](#)

My honest opinion is that the questions are too simplistic.

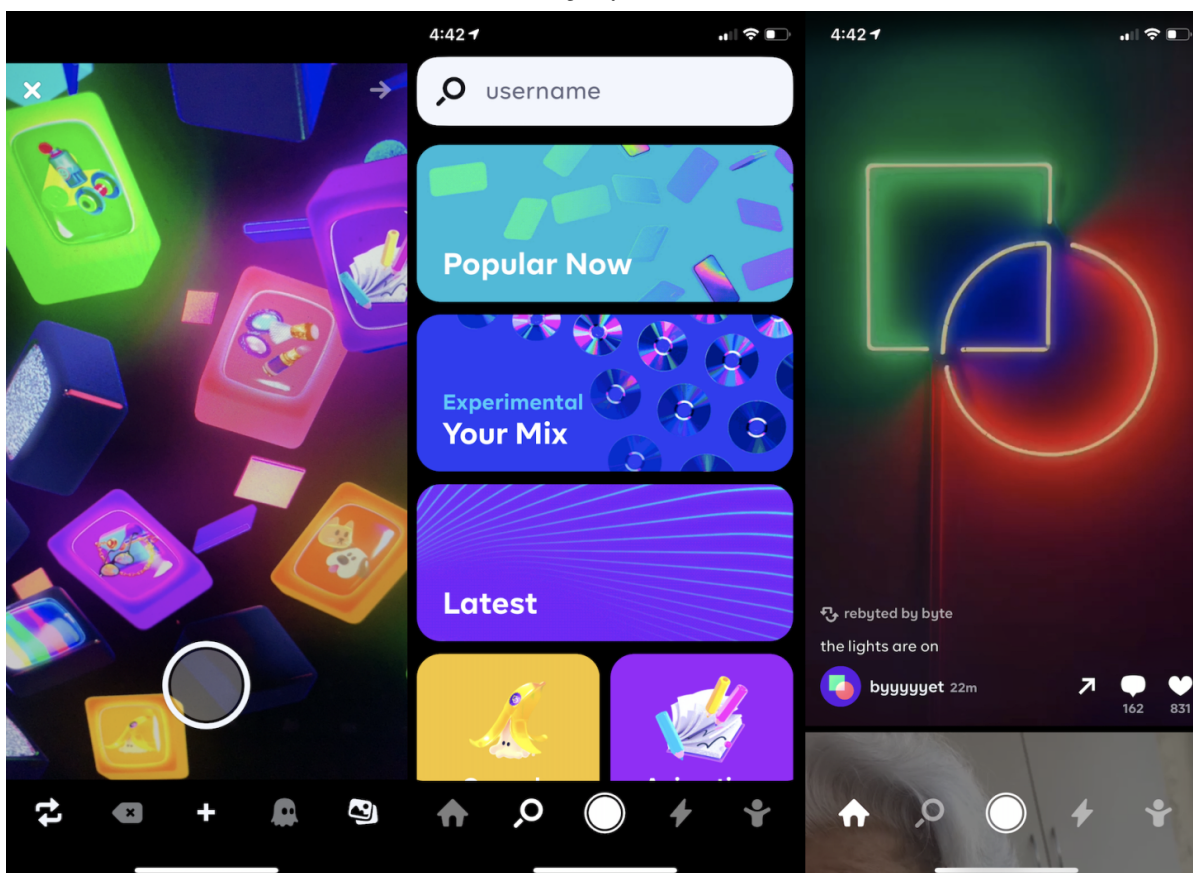
One key aspect of TikTok's global domination has been its ruthless focus on markets outside of the US. TikTok has captured a new-generation of people getting their first smartphones, enjoying extremely cheap + generous data packages, and who don't speak English as their first language.

The universality of music and performance has made the consumption and creation experience far more accessible to these first-time internet users, and quite frankly, far more enjoyable than the more utility-driven Facebook.

Moreover, what TikTok has really disrupted is the pathway to fame. The key insight from TikTok versus Instagram is that it's possible for people get a hit of 'fame' without needing to accumulate followers. Following someone is a buy-in to want to view more content from one person. But on TikTok, the experience is built around the atomic unit of content - we can get you millions of views for one video, even if no-one wants to invest in you as a person to follow. TikTok is an infinite-game of content-creation to hit fame.

For people coming onto the internet for the first time (often from areas that have been kept out of the doors of fame before), that's an intoxicating opportunity.

If I were to even go a step further, **I would also posit that the lack of employment opportunities and the absence of fulfilling work for young people in small-towns has given TikTok an even deeper resonance.** TikTok is the most immersive & effortless portal into escapism. In India particularly (which is TikTok's biggest market), TikTok is the most efficient-delivery mechanism for the escapism that Bollywood offers. It offers all the singing and dancing without needing to invest in a plot. Caricatures matter more than characters - there's a beautiful girl, a daring hero. Actors are commodities. You get everything you get out of a Bollywood movie in less than a minute.



When I heard that Vine was relaunching Byte, my gut instinct was honestly - what's the point?

In the context of global domination, TikTok has done what Vine didn't.

But after playing around with it, my mind has changed for a number of reasons:

High-Level Reasons

1. You Don't Need Global Domination

Byte can be wildly successful with just a fraction of the scale that TikTok has. Tik-Tok level of scale makes sense for their existing business model of being an ads-platform. But if Byte can create a tight-knit community with high velocity of content created, there'll be ways to make a sufficient amount of money.

For instance, I think one thing that Byte could do with its community of creative talent is become an agency for brands looking for creative video content that could be used for all video platforms. Rather than paying Byte for eyeballs within the platform, pay Byte to get access to its creative talent - set a brief, get quick replies, use the best one across its brand properties.

In other words, Byte could be a MAAS-company: memes-as-a-service.

- ### 2. The Age of Global Platforms is under threat - we are entering a period of fragmentation + unbundling of huge platforms, creating new opportunities
- The age of one tech-company having tentacles across the whole world is under threat from regulators. The issue is both political and cultural. As our world recedes from expanding globalisation, the proliferation of global tech companies will also follow. It's beginning to happen already. Countries are wary of having Huawei build communication infrastructure. Facebook has left countries vulnerable to interference from foreign state actors. And governments are already wary about TikTok (and its Chinese-owned company Bytedance). Whether it's warranted or not - big global platforms are under threat. And they're just one incident away from inciting a political overreaction. If America decides to punish Bytedance, an opportunity opens up for Byte to take over.

Product & Community

1. *Byte feels more curatorial than performative*

Byte has a tight constraint of 6 seconds, whereas TikTok has a constraint of 15-60 seconds. In turn, the bar for creating good content on Byte is a lot lower than it is for TikTok. In fact, the feed of Byte feels more slice-of-life. TikTok on the other hand is performative and requiring more talent. What's interesting is that Byte relies only on diegetic-sound (sound that naturally comes from your recording), whereas a lot of TikTok is driven by its sound library. The subtle-consequence is that Byte feels more authentic, whereas TikTok feels a lot more try-hard and varnished. Less choice = More Structure = Ease of creation.

2. *Byte has a more feel-good, coherent scrolling experience*

The tight constraint of 6 seconds and lower-degree of variability than the TikTok feed makes Byte more enjoyable to scroll through and consume. It feels less of a bombardment of the senses. It just feels good. On TikTok, you can be scrolling through so many different types of songs and video themes, it actually feels pretty schizophrenic compared to Byte. The 'feel-good' component is I think the biggest vulnerability to TikTok. Although SV Twitter are now hot on TikTok - just see the 60 year old VCs sharing their TikTok videos - TikTok is actually presents a cultural divide. When asking our HaikuJAM community about how they felt about TikTok, the majority of the responses were surprisingly negative. The most common phrase was 'waste of time'. We'll end up hearing more about this eventually - but currently Tech Twitter haven't baked this sentiment into their opinions.

3. *Big opportunity if Byte follows through in paying its creators*

Dom Hoffman (Founder of Byte) has mentioned that he will focus on paying the creators early-on, in a clear differentiation to TikTok. TikTok mostly presents monetisation opportunities for its biggest influencers who are able to strike brand partnerships, and I won't be surprised if it follows Douyin and enables transactions to be made via Videos. But I think TikTok's biggest difficulty here will be its focus on the atomic-unit of content, rather than on people building followers. The correlation between followers and virality of content is much lower than it is for, let's say, Instagram and Twitter. While this is great for user acquisition and retention, it's not that great for enabling people to consistently make money. My guess is that this is why Byte don't have an algorithmic recommendation feed at the very core of the app - they want to encourage people to amass followers. But like TikTok has proven, for engaging video content, the creator itself doesn't need to matter. If Byte can present a way for people's creative talent to be turned into money, it would be a strong incentive for top talent to shift their focus away from TikTok. But the *how* is uncertain yet.

4. *Byte makes for an interesting passive audio experience*

This is a small and subtle point but the 6 second looping experience makes for an interesting audio experience. It's fascinating to use Byte without even looking at the screen. This is a reach but 6 seconds works extremely well for music that's 80 BPM - you get two-bars of music that then loops. And most hip-hop music is between 80-110 BPM. The thematic consistency of Byte's feed makes the audio less jarring from one video to the next. There's a musicality to videos even if the video doesn't feature music. I'm not sure what this means (if anything) but it definitely adds to the feel-good component of using the app.

The battle for short-form video between TikTok and Byte is interesting. There's geopolitical components. There's a battle in values - TikTok is performative, Byte is curatorial. TikTok is driven by talent, whereas Byte is more authentic. It's easier to make something fun on Byte. It also feels good.

Vine was thrown in the dustbin by Twitter because the world back then was about racing to global domination and amassing as many users as possible. Vine was useful when it looked like it could help Twitter do that. And as soon as it started slowing down, Vine was abandoned.

But today, the world is different. You don't need the world on your platform to make money. Tightness of a community matters for monetisation, and tightness of a community is often inverse to the size of the social-network. There's general suspicions around one platform taking over the world, especially in an age where globalisation is receding.

I think Byte can be extremely interesting if it focuses on its strengths - community, velocity of content creation, and a feel-good experience. TikTok may be providing the world with a game where anyone can feel fame, but there's a lot of people in the world who don't necessarily fit in that world. This is where

smaller platforms, signalling different values to the hegemony, have a chance to take a bite out of the pie.