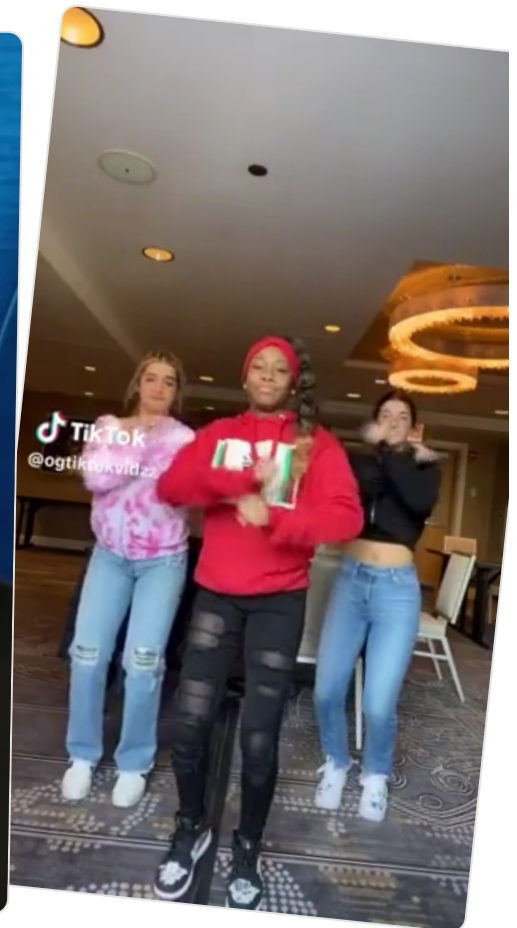
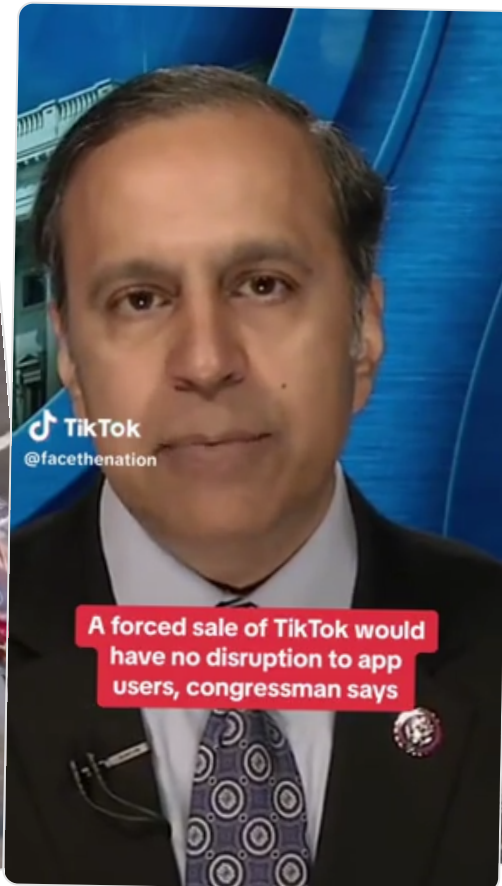


AN INCOMPLETE GUIDE

# Love, Hate or Fear It, TikTok Has Changed America



As lawmakers argue for TikTok to be sold, some of the app's most popular memes, from skateboarding with a Fleetwood Mac soundtrack to the renegade dance, have been seen tens of

**Introduction by Sapna Maheshwari**

April 19, 2024

**Hear Times writers tell the stories of how TikTok has influenced culture**

Has there ever been an app more American seeming than TikTok, with its messy democratic creativity, exhibitionism, utter lack of limits and vast variety of hustlers?

And yet, of course, TikTok is not American, which is the whole reason that in March, the House of Representatives passed a bill with broad bipartisan support that would force the Chinese owners of the video-app juggernaut to either sell to a non-Chinese owner or face a ban. Lawmakers say it's a national security threat, and that the Chinese government could lean on its owner, ByteDance, to obtain sensitive U.S. user data or influence content on the app to serve its interests.

There's a long road of legislation, deal making and legal challenges ahead before TikTok could be forced to change ownership or even be banned. The Senate would need to pass the legislation — which it may do as soon, now that the House has bundled it into a foreign aid package. It would

would have to clear regulatory approval. And after all that, Beijing could simply block a deal.

But imagining what a United States without TikTok would look like throws into sharp relief just how much the app has worked its way into American culture.

Roughly 170 million Americans use TikTok. That's half the population of the United States.

TikTok, which officially landed in the United States in 2018, was the most downloaded app in the country, and the world, in 2020, 2021 and 2022. It wasn't that the elements of it were so new — compelling videos from randos had long been a staple of American pop culture — but TikTok put the pieces together in a new way.

Unlike Instagram, Facebook or Snapchat, TikTok didn't build itself around social connections. Its goal is pure, uncut entertainment. The algorithm ingested every data point it could from what users skipped, liked or shared — and spat it directly into the maddeningly habit-forming For You Page. Fans whispered reverently that it knew them better than they knew themselves.

Here are 19 ways of understanding how TikTok became part of American life. The music America listens to, the movies it sees, what conspiracies it believes, how it can

celebrity — all of it has been influenced by TikTok, for good and bad. Even if you’ve never opened the app, you’ve lived in a culture that exists downstream of what happens there.

[\*\*Hollywood\*\*](#)[\*\*Trends\*\*](#)[\*\*School\*\*](#)[\*\*Fashion\*\*](#)[\*\*Shopping\*\*](#)[\*\*Privacy\*\*](#)[\*\*Your Screen\*\*](#)[\*\*News\*\*](#)[\*\*Music\*\*](#)[\*\*The Other Apps\*\*](#)[\*\*Cooking\*\*](#)[\*\*Market Power\*\*](#)[\*\*Advice\*\*](#)[\*\*Conspiracy Theories\*\*](#)[\*\*National Security\*\*](#)[\*\*Your Brain\*\*](#)[\*\*Political Campaigns\*\*](#)[\*\*Mental Health\*\*](#)[\*\*Your Bank\*\*](#)

**By Brooks Barnes**



**Insular, slow-changing Hollywood** responded to TikTok's arrival in 2018 in typical fashion: complete dismissal. We're way too busy making *pictures* to worry about some new short-form video app.

Then came denial. (This thing is just another fad.) Next, fear. (Teenagers and young adults are never going to the movies again!)

But there's a plot twist: Hollywood has come to see TikTok as indispensable.

"Anyone But You," a Sony romantic comedy starring Sydney Sweeney and Glen Powell, arrived to a piddly \$8 million in ticket sales over Christmas weekend. The movie

users (at the urging of Sony) began making videos of themselves re-enacting the credit sequence.

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TikTok also served as a ticket-selling machine for “M3gan,” a Universal-Blumhouse horror movie about a sassy robot that has spawned a new franchise; “Wonka,” which debuted in December and collected \$632 million; and the Barbenheimer box office phenomenon, otherwise known as “Barbie,” with \$1.4 billion, and “Oppenheimer,” with about \$1 billion. Rote glamour shots and insipid interviews — ye olde studio publicity tools — don’t work on TikTok; users want behind-the-scenes “realness.” Hence “Oppenheimer” stars goofing in a hotel hallway before a premiere, and pink-clad “Barbie” stars cavorting on the floor with puppies.

“Now that studios have figured out how to harness TikTok, the last thing they want is for it to go dark,” said Sue Fleishman, a former Universal and Warner Bros. executive who is now a consultant. “That would actually be a big problem.”

**By Sapna Maheshwari**

**#disaster**

**#medialiteracy**

**#moonlanding**

**Recently,** V Spehar has posted TikTok videos telling viewers what they might have missed from President Biden's State of the Union address, the first 15 actions that former President Donald J. Trump said he would take if he's re-elected in November and Caitlin Clark's WNBA starting salary.

the handle @UnderTheDeskNews and films many clips lying on the floor, a gimmick that began as an effort to differentiate from the authoritative tone of traditional television news anchors. The style of communication has resonated enough to make Mx. Spehar a regular at White House briefings with social media influencers.

News aggregation and analysis accounts like Mx. Spehar's are shaping the discourse about current events in the United States, especially among young people. They're a modern version of old-school bloggers — users respond to the personal tone, and the editorializing. (Some creators have even built followings simply by reading print news articles to their followers.)

Pew Research Center has found that about one-third of 18- to 29-year-olds say they get news regularly on the platform, far outpacing people in other age groups.

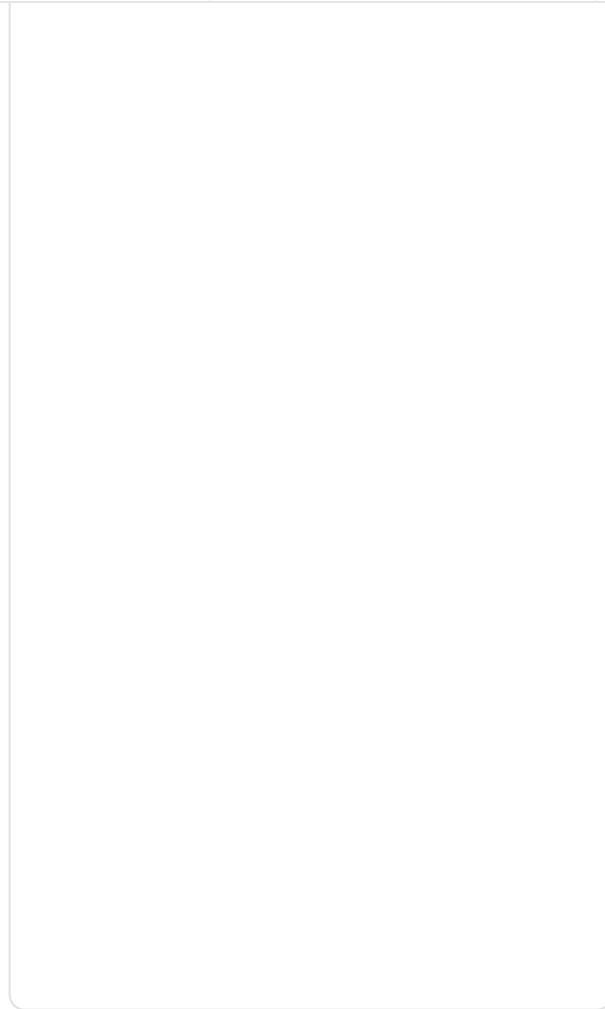
In 2023, about 14% of American adults said they regularly got news on TikTok, compared with just 3% percent in 2020.

Other sites have similar draws. Roughly 16 percent of all American adults get their news from Instagram, and a similar amount from X. Far more people consume news on Facebook and YouTube.



mainstream outlets nervous, and has raised some concerns around accuracy and context as original reporting is funneled through other accounts. The Wall Street Journal has more than 340,000 followers on TikTok, while The New York Times has nearly 630,000 — numbers that pale in comparison with the followings of individual commentators like Mx. Spehar.

**By Tiffany Hsu**



**#conspiracy**

**Several dentists recently took to TikTok** to debunk a conspiracy theory: that toothpaste tubes were printed with secret codes signaling their true ingredients to powerful people in the know.

Their efforts garnered far fewer views than the video that offered up the theory in early January. Not counting all the times the post was referenced in videos by other TikTok users, it has been seen more than seven million times in less than three months.

of assumptions and coincidences — often concerning the schemes of a nefarious echelon of elites — is illustrated by dramatic images generated by artificial intelligence and spooky musical tracks. (Other such hits include false theories that President Joe Biden rigged the Super Bowl in favor of the Kansas City Chiefs or that Justin Bieber had signaled he was a victim of PizzaGate. False allegations of voter fraud also abound.)

Abbie Richards, a misinformation researcher who studies the TikTok ecosystem, said that such posts thrive because of the platform's potent recommendation algorithms and its low barrier to entry.

TikTok allows users to earn money from their videos through tools such as its creator rewards program and livestream subscriptions. Conspiracy theories, which draw high engagement, are one of the most profitable categories, said Ms. Richards, a senior video producer at the liberal watchdog group Media Matters.

“It’s like candy for your brain — it tells a story that simplifies the world in a way that feels good to you,” she said.

A quarter of American adults who use the app create 98% of its videos.

known for conspiratorial content, including popular posts about satanic hit men and Britney Spears. They claimed that the colored dots on toothpaste tubes correspond to all-natural, medicinal or chemical ingredients.

The post was quickly reposted, copied and stitched into reaction videos. Some came from dentists, who explained that the dots were actually used during the toothpaste packaging process to help guide manufacturing equipment to properly cut and seal the tubes.

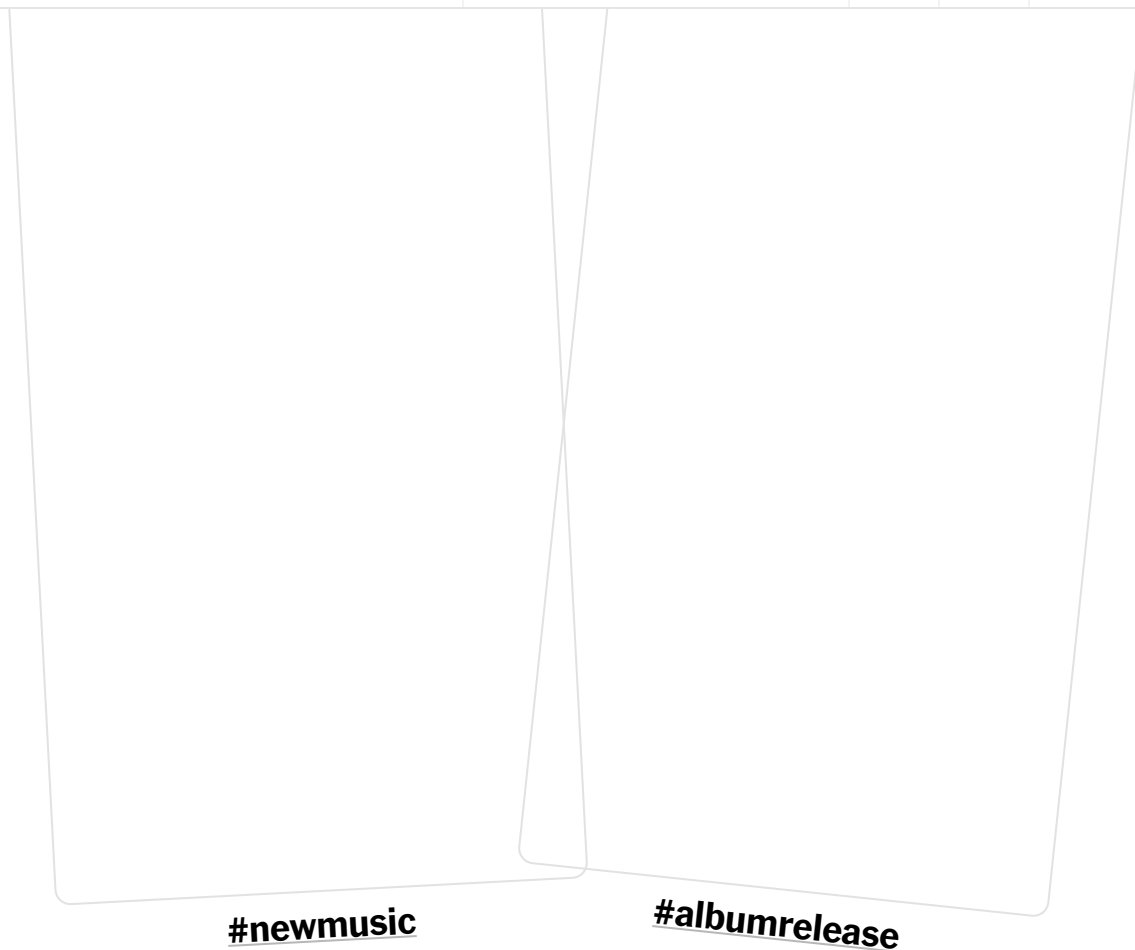
That conspiracy theory is not new — they rarely are on TikTok. Colgate, a major toothpaste manufacturer, addressed the color patch rumor last year and said that “as much as we love cracking secret codes, this one actually has nothing to crack because it’s entirely untrue.”

Even silly rumors, however, can spin out from TikTok into real-world harms. The baseless concerns that store-bought toothpaste tubes might hide toxic ingredients reignited recommendations to opt instead for unproven and potentially damaging homemade options.

**By Madison Malone Kircher**

Including but certainly not limited to: Butter boards, sexy water, blueberry milk nails, unexpected red, lucky girl syndrome, first-time-cool syndrome, bed rotting, 75 soft, 75 cozy, bookshelf wealth, loud budgeting, broccoli freckles, strawberry makeup, glazed donut skin, latte makeup, cowboy copper hair, old money blonde, expensive brunette, orange peel theory, quiet luxury, stealth wealth, tomato girl summer, indie sleaze, coquette, looksmaxxing, male perms, vanilla girl, clean girl, soft girl, coastal grandma, coastal cowgirl, low-high visual weight makeup, sleepy-girl mocktails, fluffy coffee, shrimp tree, girl math, girl dinner, mob wife, clowncore, balletcore, Barbiecore, royalcore, corecore.

**By Ben Sisario**



**For the music industry**, TikTok has become a potent but unpredictable promotional outlet, and a vital one in the race to mint a new hit. Young artists like Olivia Rodrigo and Lil Nas X saw their popularity explode on the platform, and acts like Fleetwood Mac have seen decades-old songs get a boost from memes on the app.

But TikTok is also the latest tech platform to draw the anger of the music industry for low royalty rates. In February, Universal Music Group, which represents artists like Ms. Rodrigo, Taylor Swift, Billie Eilish and Drake, withdrew the rights to its music on the app, saying that TikTok was trying to “bully” the company to accept low terms.

Within days, millions of TikTok videos using music from Universal artists went mute, and since then guessing which side would blink first has become a media-business parlor game.

Last week, however, Ms. Swift — who releases her music through Universal, but has owned the copyrights to her work since 2018 — broke ranks and put her songs back on TikTok, just ahead of the release of her next album on Friday. Now the question is, will other artists will follow.

**By David E. Sanger**

**For years I thought TikTok was mostly a parenting problem,** and had only tangential bearing on what I cover: threats to national security. It took a while — and a lot of

officials — for me to become concerned about the potential that it could also pose a major problem on that front.

Not because the company's Chinese owners could figure out your dance-move preferences, but because the algorithm at the core of the app is wrapped in such mystery.

So what's the issue? The algorithm doesn't belong to TikTok; it is provided by engineers working for ByteDance, the Chinese company that controls the platform and develops the code in enormous secrecy in laboratories around the world, in Beijing, Singapore and Mountain View, Calif.

**No one outside the company knows exactly what goes into those algorithms.**

The Chinese government is intent on keeping it that way. It has issued regulations that require Beijing's regulators to grant permission before any ByteDance algorithms can be licensed to outsiders. They are unlikely to do so.

And so, as long as it is written by ByteDance, and can't be picked apart on the outside, there will always be the risk that it will become a pipeline for influencing citizens, and thus voters, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways.

Senator Mark Warner, the chairman of Senate Intelligence Committee, has noted that because TikTok has emerged as a major source of news — and because it collects data on



crucial — it poses a serious threat, and could become “the most powerful propaganda tool ever.”

## **Of course, that threat is mostly hypothetical at this point.**

At least based on what the United States has made public. The intelligence agencies have been giving closed-door briefings, but presumably there hasn't been a classified blockbuster, since there would likely be great pressure to declassify it.

Still, we have seen waves of new influence campaigns flowing out of China — much of it aimed at nations other than the United States. While TikTok has not been at the center of those campaigns, clearly, the Chinese have learned a lot in the past few years, including from the Russians. (Researchers have also found that topics commonly suppressed in China, including about the Tibetan and Uyghur populations, appear to be unusually underrepresented on TikTok compared with Instagram.)

This is not a problem that would be solved by simply selling TikTok's operations to an American buyer. Sure, the bill that went through the House bans a new, Western-owned TikTok from having any “operational relationship” with ByteDance, “including any cooperation with respect to the operation of a content recommendation algorithm.” Good luck with that — TikTok would no longer be TikTok.

hood. Because to make Americans trust TikTok, the country will need an early warning system, something that will assure everyone that a technology that became popular because it generated memes and celebrates self-expression does not become a conduit for a foreign government interested in subtly influencing how we vote.

**By Natasha Singer**

#toilettoks

#school

#schoolbathroom

**Southern Alamance Middle School**, a public school in Graham, N.C., recently came up with a novel way to combat student distractions from social media. Or at least to curb the phenomenon that some teachers have dubbed “Toilet TikToks.”

The problem: Educators there noticed a spike in the number of students asking to leave class — sometimes as frequently as nine times per day — to go to the bathroom, where they made TikTok videos.

The solution: Administrators decided to remove the bathroom mirrors that students used to film TikToks and primp for their close-ups. They also introduced an online system that issues students digital hall passes when they

administrators to track students' locations. "Since removing the mirrors," administrators wrote in a message to parents in January, "we have seen a drastic decrease in bathroom visits from students asking to be excused just to make videos."

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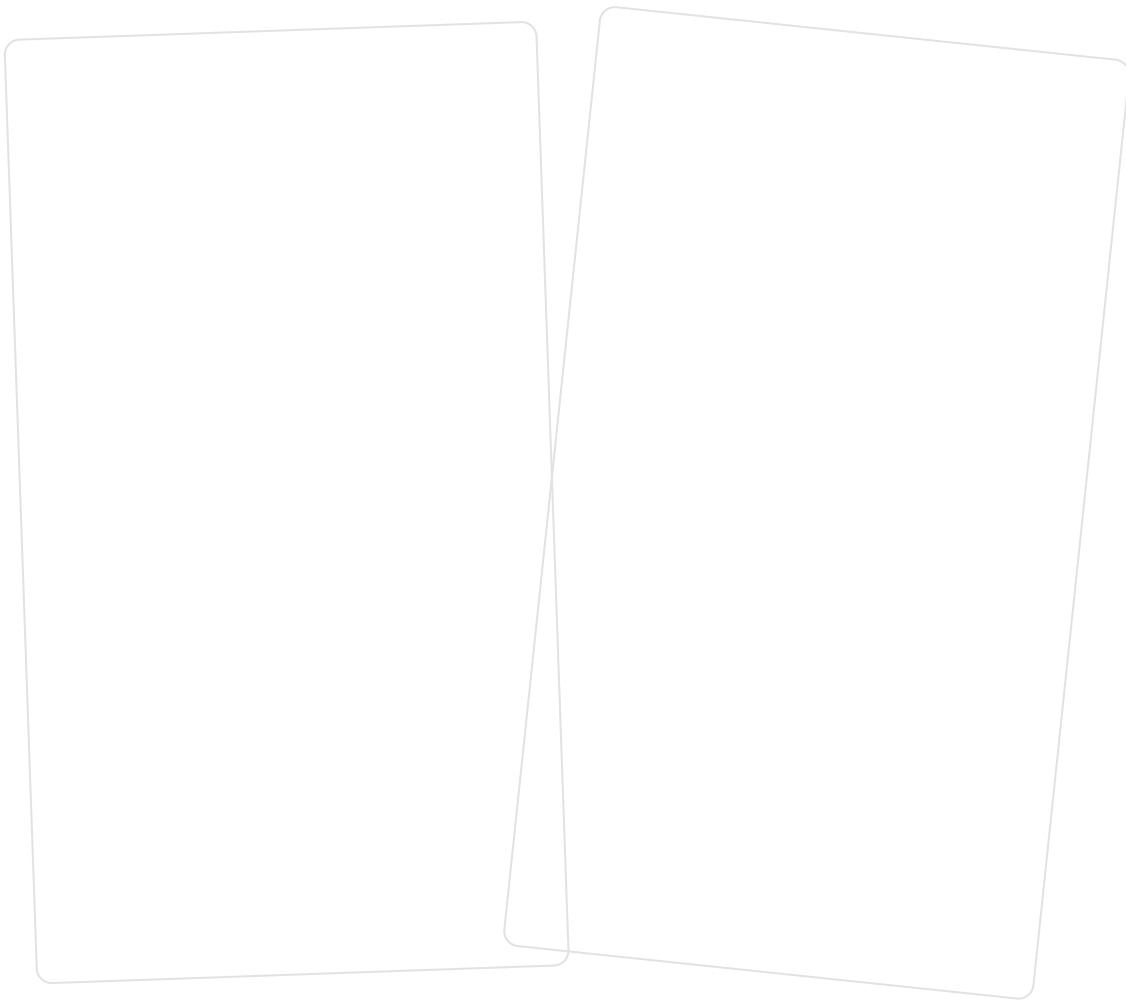
Toilettoks — a TikTok genre, dating back at least five years, in which students use school bathrooms as film sets for dance routines, lip-syncing clips or critiques of unclean lavatories — are one of the milder social media annoyances for schools.

Across the United States, students have also used school bathrooms as arenas to stage, film and post videos of bullying, physical assaults on schoolmates and acts of vandalism.

In March, Alamance-Burlington schools announced that it was joining dozens of other U.S. districts that have filed lawsuits accusing social media platforms, including TikTok, of unfairly ensnaring young people.

"We're seeing the negative impacts of social media on our students every day," Kristy Davis, the acting superintendent of Alamance-Burlington schools, said. "Their well-being has to be the top priority."

**By Amanda Hess**



**My favorite Instagram account** is a collection of TikToks. Curated by the videographer Leia Jospé, @favetiktoks420 hunts for Gen-Z's ickiest thirst traps and bleakest acting

package, uploading them directly to a social network that I actually use.

By the time TikTok debuted, in 2017, I was already in my 30s and too old and lazy to work another app into my rotation. Instagram and Twitter were distracting enough. But now those platforms lie downstream of TikTok's creative wellspring, waiting for bits of its most popular content to drift into the open internet. TikToks float into my friends' Instagram stories, percolate into our group chats, swirl into my Twitter feed. My phone is always bleating with its outro sound effect. I rarely open TikTok, but I watch TikToks all the time.

TikToks let loose a chaotic element into Instagram's internet mall, and they break the monotony of Twitter's boosted tech-bro threads. They stock YouTube compilations and spark Facebook debates and fuel trend pieces.

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If TikTok were to disappear, it would feel, at least for a while, like the internet's big content spigot had been turned to a trickle. Rival platforms have tried to remake themselves in TikTok's image — building in short-form videos, algorithmic timelines and searchable sound clips —

perpetual discovery machine. We'd be left with a diluted version of its secret sauce.

But any network that hopes to capitalize on its own popularity will disrupt its product. Even as other social media platforms try to become TikTok, TikTok is trying to become them, lengthening its videos to compete with YouTube and introducing an e-commerce platform to “drive meaningful shopping experiences” and rival Instagram. Eventually some new, inexplicably addictive platform will rise in its place. And I will rely on the kindness of some slightly younger strangers to show me what's on it.

**By Dana G. Smith**

**#relaxing**

**#satisfying**

**#oddlysatisfying**

Much has been said about the “addictive design” of TikTok. But what is the social media site actually doing to our brains?

There is very little research looking at what goes on inside people’s heads while they’re using TikTok. But one small study conducted on Chinese university students used magnetic resonance imaging to compare brain activity while they watched personalized TikTok videos (ones the algorithm had selected based on their past use) versus generalized ones (videos the app recommended to new users).



brain, including ones associated with reward, attention and processing social information, while viewing personalized videos. In other words, the algorithm did its job.

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Other social media platforms have been shown to turn on similar brain regions. So what makes TikTok different? Some experts have proposed that it can send users into a “flow state”: the experience of being so absorbed in a task that the person loses track of time. Backing this up, one study found that TikTok users reported experiencing higher levels of flow than Instagram users.

“Flow” is often associated with work or hobbies — activities that are challenging enough to be engaging but not frustrating. Watching videos doesn’t require skill the way that many flow-inducing activities do, yet the app is able to induce the feelings of enjoyment, concentration and time distortion that are characteristic of flow — possibly because of the algorithm’s immersive quality.

**By Vanessa Friedman**

**#metgala**

**#tiktokfashion**

**#redcarpet**

**Is there any more official signal** that a business titan has arrived at the heart of the American social-financial-artistic-political power nexus than being invited to be an honorary host of the annual Met Gala, a.k.a. “the party of

asked to join its convener, the Vogue editor, Anna Wintour, in the Metropolitan Museum's soaring atrium as the great and the good of Hollywood, fashion, sports, Wall Street and Washington swan past?

On May 6, TikTok will be lead sponsor of both the party and the museum fashion exhibition it celebrates. The company's chief executive, Shou Chew, has been named an honorary chair of this year's gala, along with the Loewe designer Jonathan Anderson, while Ms. Wintour, Zendaya, Bad Bunny, Jennifer Lopez and Chris Hemsworth are the event's co-chairs.

That placement would put TikTok firmly in the tradition of previous gala sponsors like Amazon, Instagram and Apple — tech companies bedazzled by the Old Establishment, which in turn is bedazzled by their blush of upstart cool.

It is an acknowledgment, if any were needed, of the prominent role the app has come to play in fashion in a mere few years.

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It was only in 2021, after all, that Ms. Wintour was criticized for inviting TikTok stars such as Addison Rae and Dixie D'Amelio to the party — for somehow cheapening it by catering to the buzzfeed machine of the smartphone, rather

even if they can afford the \$50,000 price tag for a seat; Ms. Wintour vets every guest, and the price of admission has to do with cultural currency even more than actual currency.

Which is why, of course, TikTok belongs. Despite the fact that all social media is forbidden inside the party.

Fast-forward three years, and there are more than 75 billion views associated with the #TikTokfashion hashtag; almost 500 million with #2023Gala alone. Luxury brands routinely sign up TikTok stars as brand ambassadors along with every other kind of star, hoping to access their audience (received relevance is something Vogue might be getting out of the association, too). And thus is created a virtuous — or vicious? — cycle in which TikTok feeds the gala machine, which feeds TikTok, which is the vicarious experience that has come to feed us all.

**By Ellen Barry**



**#mentalhealth**

**#adhdcommunity**

**#psychiatry**

**TikTok is a mother lode of mental health content**, filled with compelling first-person accounts of everything from major depression to selective mutism. Depending on your perspective, that's either a very good thing — or concerning.

Corey Basch, who analyzed 100 popular TikTok videos with the hashtag **#mentalhealth** for a 2022 study, emerged concerned about the looping effect of the algorithm.

“What’s so important and disturbing to recognize is the downward spiral that users can get swept into,” said Dr. Basch, a professor of public health at William Paterson

anxiety, they can easily spend hours exposed to repetitive content known as an echo chamber.”

The surge of content about mental health has meant that young people are more likely to self-diagnose before seeing a clinician, psychiatrists report. Diagnoses for ADHD and anxiety disorders shot up during the pandemic years, especially among young people.

Some researchers have expressed concern about how profit motives may feed into these trends, since platforms often feature advertising from app-based mental health services, and influencers have sponsorship deals with such companies.

“They say we can diagnose you really quick, just take this five-question quiz and we can send you a prescription in a nice little box,” said Holly Avella, a Ph.D. candidate at Rutgers University who has researched mental health and social media.

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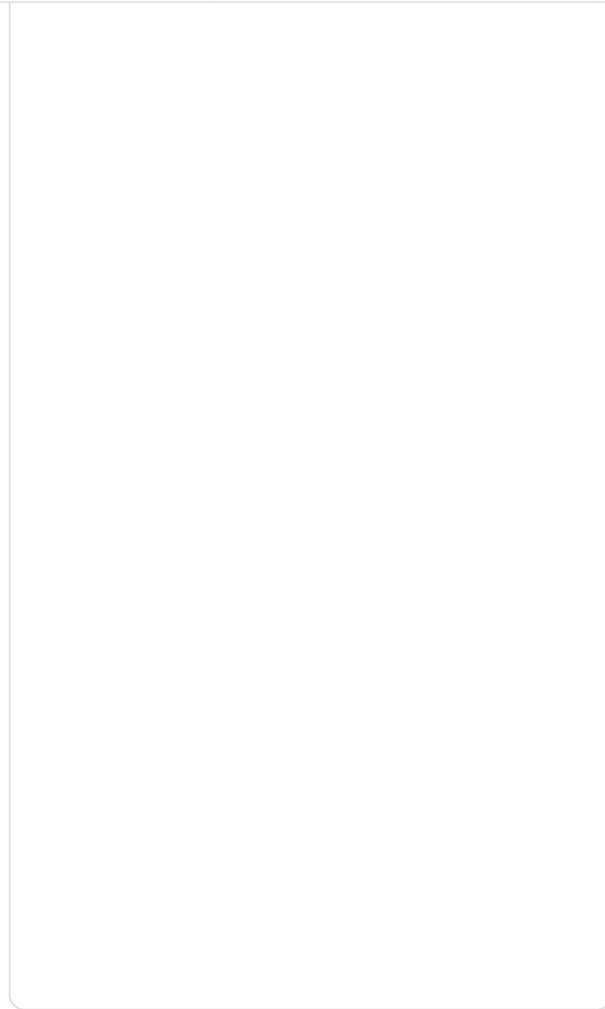
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Researchers also warn that TikTok videos can deliver misinformation. A review of literature published last year found that around one-fifth of videos mentioning cognitive behavioral therapy were inaccurate, describing it as ineffective or harmful.

national conversation around mental illness.

“You can sit there on your pedestal and pooh-pooh it all you want,” said Kate Speer, who has used her social media feeds to describe her experience of serious mental illness. TikTok is helpful for “the very people who are struggling the most, those who don’t have access to services in the real world and who might even be so disabled by mental illness that they are locked in their houses.”

**By Michael M. Grynbaum**



**#campaign**

**President Biden turned down an opportunity** to appear on CBS and reach tens of millions of potential voters tuning in for this year’s Super Bowl. Instead, he released his first TikTok.

“Chiefs or Niners?” asked a disembodied, youthful-sounding voice. “Two great quarterbacks; hard to decide,” replied the president, casually dressed in a half-zip sweater and khakis. The caption was “lol hey guys.”

Team Biden, like most other major politicians, had previously resisted joining the app because of security concerns related to its Chinese ownership. (The Donald



expressed divergent views about the app, proposing a ban during his presidency but recently criticizing an attempt by Congress to curtail its use in the United States.)

Giving in was a nod to the irrefutable importance of TikTok, where about 14 percent of American adults regularly get news, in an election year. There's now a small studio in the Biden campaign office in Wilmington, Del., where staff members can film "candid" videos with the candidate.

62% of Americans between 18- and 29-years-old use the platform, greater than the share of that age group that voted in the last presidential election.

Campaigns have a rich tradition of adapting to the latest technological fads, from wireless radio to television sets and, more recently, to social platforms like Facebook and Snapchat. Many of these efforts share a how-do-you-do-fellow-kids quality to them, and in an attempt to avoid appearing out of touch, the Biden campaign relies on young, digitally fluent aides to host its TikToks.

It works, sometimes. One video claims to have Trump "caught on camera" making offensive remarks, an attempt to replicate the amateur spontaneity of many TikToks. (In reality, it's someone's iPhone aimed at a TV broadcast of a Trump speech.) Other times it comes across try-hard-y, like

Jordan using a popular “I Ain’t Reading All That” online meme.

The @bidenhq account, though, is hovering around 299,000 followers — still small beans in the TikTok world. But in a close race, every lol counts.

**By Jordyn Holman**

**#denimskirt**

**#springfashion**

**#goingouttops**

**account** about mini skirts or linen tops she finds on Amazon, she earns \$10,000 to \$12,000 for getting people to buy what she suggests. During her biggest month, Ms. Springs, 25, raked in \$50,000 for her posts.

TikTok is now a multibillion-dollar shopping experience — and companies have glommed on. The internet might have killed malls, but now it is one big mall.

Because the bite-size videos are addictive, and partly because advertising on the platform is relatively inexpensive for smaller brands, the app has become a core part of many companies' marketing plans. Brands say that their videos populated with everyday people can more easily go viral than on, say, Instagram, where they often need to pay expensive influencers. And people who notice shopping-related content spend more time on TikTok, according to eMarketer.

The average user spends nearly an hour — 58 minutes — per day on the platform.

Last year, TikTok debuted a prominent shopping feed on the app that now allows people to buy goods directly from a wide array of vendors. Some fashion and beauty brands think about the TikTok content they could make for a product before developing it.

skin care brand with roughly 190,000 followers on the app, says if she can't think of 200 TikTok videos that she could make for a product, she'll likely scrap it entirely.

**By Santul Nerkar**

When a product goes viral on TikTok, those views often translate directly into increased sales. In some cases, the effect has been dramatic:



## Stanley tumblers

Company revenue last year was \$750 million, up from \$73 million in 2019, after the product became a sensation on TikTok.



## Feta cheese

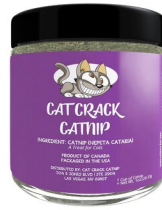
Demand jumped 200 percent at one grocery chain in 2021, after a recipe for baked feta pasta took off and amassed more than 20 million views.



## Cerave

Sales increased by more than 60 percent in 2020 after skin care

TikTok users discovered the  
drugstore mainstay.



## Cat Crack Catnip

It briefly sold out in 2021 after  
TikTok users posted videos of their  
cats going crazy for it.



## Isle of Paradise tanning spray

It sold out in 48 hours in 2021 after a  
post about it went viral.



## Prepdeck kitchen storage products

They went out of stock in 2021 after

**By Becky Hughes**

**#pestoeggs**

**#pancakecereal**

**#italiansub**

the hit recipes of today (like Emily Mariko's salmon and rice bowl) and those of yesteryear (The Silver Palate's chicken marbella) is the medium.

Before, a static image was all you had to get the point across in a recipe, with step-by-step instructions printed in a cookbook.

Now recipes unfold over time. In a 30-second video, there are obvious visual cues that viewers can absorb, techniques they can sink their teeth into. The videos depict process, not just stages, and allow you to jump-cut your way through a recipe in a few blinks.

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But for all the access to techniques and cuisines that TikTok has provided home cooks, the platform favors concepts, over actual recipes — eggs fried in a puddle of pesto, sandwich fillings chopped into a homogenous mixture, mini pancakes served like cereal. The most shareable recipes are the ones that you can watch once, then turn around and make — no measurements, bake times or reading needed. Just dump, stir, like, follow, repeat.



**By Kashmir Hill**

**Every social media app** is, essentially, a spy in your pocket. When it comes to data collection, TikTok is no worse than the others. The main difference, and the one that's driving the current conversation in Washington, is that TikTok is owned by a Chinese company.

TikTok, like other apps, seeks a huge amount of information from you, and some pieces of it that can seem innocuous are quite revealing, including:

## **Your I.P. address and location**

An I.P. address is a unique identifier associated with your device or the network you use to get on the internet. TikTok can use your I.P. address and location to determine the advertising you see, but it can also reveal other real-life associations. When people access a social network from the same I.P. address, it reveals that they may know one another offline. ByteDance, which owns TikTok, used I.P. address data collected from journalists using the app to try to identify company employees who were speaking to them.

Giving TikTok access to the hundreds (or thousands) of numbers and email addresses on your phone — an opt-in feature — lets them draw unexpected insights into your life, such as who your doctors are, your present and former colleagues, your one-night stands, and on and on. TikTok may then recommend you follow them as “people you may know” — and your account, in turn, will be suggested to them, so beware of sharing contacts if you’re trying to stay anonymous. Even if you don’t share your contacts, TikTok can look for the phone or email address you gave the company in other users’ address books unless you go into the privacy settings and turn off “Suggest Your Account to Others.”

## **Your messages**

Unless your messages are end-to-end encrypted, which they are not on TikTok, they can be reviewed by the company storing them for you.

## **Your viewing history**

Are you obsessed with steamy Twilight highlight reels or home repair videos? TikTok knows.

By Anemona Hartocollis

**#early20s**

**#midlifemuse**

**#grwm**

**Shelley Polanco is 22, and a senior at Brandeis.** As she faces life after college, she is not looking for practical advice about, say, jobs and careers. She yearns instead for a

tell her about her future emotional life and satisfaction.

And so, she likes following TikTok accounts that feature “an older woman of culture, kind of like this auntie figure who gets on TikTok and records ‘things I wish I would have known in my 20s.’”

She’s a fan of @itsrealllylola. “She’s turning 25, and she starts to speak about all the things she’s learned, the ways you maybe want to ignore people’s judgments on you,” Ms. Polanco says. “She’s big on ‘live your life and have fun.’”

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She peers decades into her future with the help of Dr. Amanda Hanson, “#midlifemuse,” who invites comments about life after 50 from her TikTok followers. Or Shera Seven. “She is this 40-year-old woman, I want to say, giving really brutal dating advice,” Ms. Polanco said.

Ms. Polanco was having trouble seeing more than three months out, and found support from a TikTok transformation coach named Shannon. “I searched, ‘how to write goals,’” she said. “There was this lady walking you through this meditation to visualize your future self, and it was one of the only times I could see an older version of myself. It was so inspirational, I closed the app, got out a piece of paper and started writing.”

**By Mike Dang**

**#interest**

**#paytransparency**

**#yourrichbff**

In a video by the account @salarytransparentstreet that's been viewed more than 23 million times, a lawyer candidly shares she makes \$134,000 a year, a teacher says she earns \$53,000 and a man who does chemical risk assessments for

The point, according to Hannah Williams, the 27-year-old content creator behind the account, is to help people better understand what they could be earning. (Ms. Williams says she made more than \$1 million in 2023 before expenses through her videos and earns revenue from brand sponsorships and ads).

FinTok, as the money and personal finance community on the app is called, has fundamentally changed the way we accept advice from strangers — and altered how much ordinary people are willing to share about that most taboo subject: how much money they have.

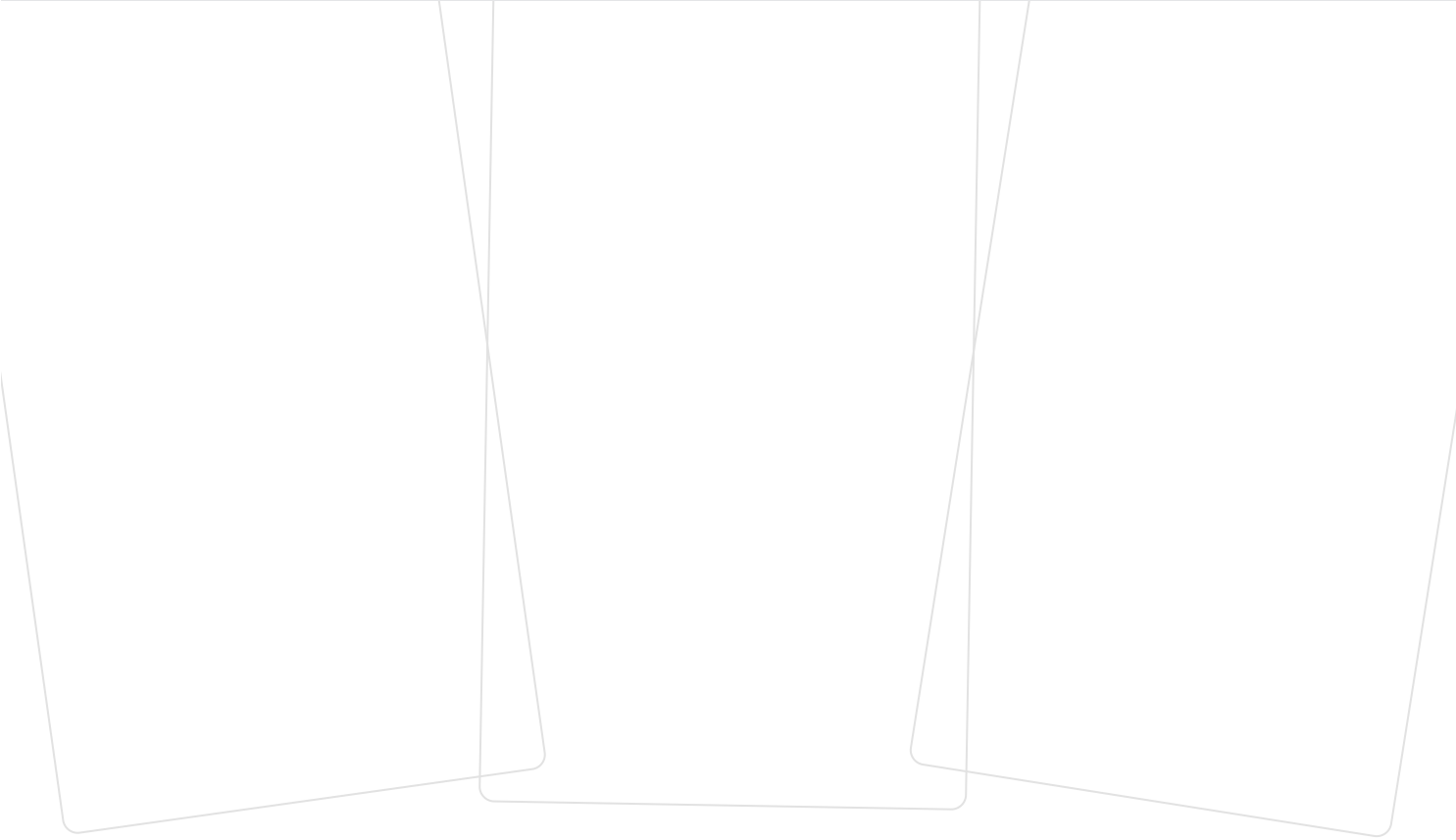
Sure, the app has allowed established finance gurus like Dave Ramsey and Suze Orman to expand their empires. But it has also given rise to people like Vivian Tu, a 30-year-old former Wall Street trader who runs the account @yourrichbff. Ms. Tu, who has 2.5 million followers, offers practical advice on high-yield savings accounts and retirement savings, but can also take widely discussed TikTok drama and show people what financial lessons they can learn from it.

57% of Gen Z users like or leave a comment after watching a video on the platform.

videos requires a certain amount of skepticism. There are plenty of cryptocurrency creators on TikTok who like to focus on the potential gains rather than warning people of the risks. There are also crypto scams, including a rampant one using deepfake videos of Elon Musk. (Ads for crypto or financial services are banned from the platform, in part to help protect people from getting involved with high-risk investments. )

But often, when scams or bad advice crop up, commenters have no problem offering corrections. When one creator posted a video about how to get a high credit limit using dubious methods, her comment section quickly filled up with users accusing her of committing fraud. The video was soon deleted.

**By Ashwin Seshagiri**



TikTok didn't invent vertically oriented videos. But it has been very influential in getting people to watch their screens upright instead of sideways. It's a phenomenon that is sticking elsewhere, with Apple, a professional Spanish soccer league and major news publishers all producing vertical videos. Even The New York Times is on board.

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