

'It's just not hitting like it used to': TikTok was in its flop era before it got banned in the US

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TikTok is facing its most credible existential threat yet. Last week, the US Congress passed a bill that bans the short-form video app if it does not sell to a company that is not controlled by a “foreign adversary” by this time next year. But as a former avid user whose time on the app has dropped sharply in recent months, I am left wondering – will I even be using the app a year from now? Like many Americans of my demographic (aging millennial), I first started using TikTok regularly when the Covid-19 pandemic began and lockdowns gave many of us more time than we knew how to fill. As 2020 wore on, the global news climate becoming somehow progressively worse with each passing day, what began as a casual distraction became a kind of mental health lifeline. My average total screen time exploded from four hours a day to upwards of 10 – much of which were spent scrolling my “For You” page, the main feed of algorithmically recommended videos within TikTok. At the time, content was predictable, mostly light and mind-numbing. From “Get Ready With Me” (GRWM) narratives to kitten videos and the classic TikTok viral dances, I could dive into the algorithmic oblivion anytime I wanted. I loved TikTok. The “For You” page taught me actually useful skills like sign language, crocheting and how to cook when you hate cooking (I do). It also filled my days with extremely dumb distractions like the rise (and subsequent criticisms) of a tradwife family and the politicized implosion of several influencers in 2022 over cheating allegations. I enjoy watching urban exploration videos in which people inexplicably hop down into sewers and investigate abandoned houses to see what they can find. Over the course of many months, I watched a man build an underground aquarium and fill it with live eels. I treasured every wet moment. Once I learned a dumb TikTok dance – Doja Cat’s Say So, which went mega-viral during the pandemic. I probably could still do it if pressed, but don’t look for it on my TikTok profile – I came to my senses and deleted it. I don’t post often, but I did genuinely enjoy the trend of “romanticizing your life” – setting mundane video clips to inspirational music. I was inspired to share my own attempts. But now, according to my iPhone’s Screen Time tool, my average time on TikTok ranges from 30 minutes to two hours a day – a far cry from the four-plus hours I was spending at the peak of the pandemic. My withdrawal from TikTok was not a conscious choice – it happened naturally, the same way my addiction began. As my partner put it during a recent nightly scroll before bed: “It’s just not hitting like it used to.” I still find some joy on the app. The delight is just less abundant than it was. Something has changed on TikTok. It’s become less serendipitous than before, though I don’t know when. Others seem to agree, from aggrieved fellow journalists to content creators on the platform and countless social media threads – which raises the question: as TikTok faces a potential ban in the US, was the app already on its way out? Top apps wax and wane, and content creators notice. As with all trends, the hot social network of the moment tends to wax and wane (remember Clubhouse?). Facebook – the original top dog of social media and still the biggest

by user numbers – has seen young users flee in recent years, despite overall growth bringing monthly active users to 3 billion in 2023. But unlike Meta, TikTok is not a public company – which means we may never get granular insight into its user metrics, which have surely evolved over the past few years amid political turmoil and changes to the platform. The company has recently stated that the proposed ban would affect more than 170 million monthly active users in the US. Creators – especially those who get most of their income from social media – are hyper-aware of fluctuations in the app of the moment, said Brooke Erin Duffy, associate professor of communication at Cornell University. From the time TikTok was first threatened with a ban by Donald Trump in 2020, major users of the platform raised the example of Vine – the now defunct short-form video platform – as a cautionary tale. “They are aware of the ability of an entire platform to vanish with very little notice,” she said. “[The potential Trump ban] was four years ago, and since then there has been an ebb and flow of panic about the future among creators.” With that in mind, a number of creators who grew a large audience on TikTok have been diversifying, trying to migrate their fanbases to other platforms in case TikTok disappears. Others have grown frustrated with the algorithm, reporting wildly fluctuating TikTok views and impressions for their videos. Gaming influencer DejaTwo said TikTok has been “very frustrating lately” in a recent post explaining why they believe influencers are leaving the platform. “The only reason I still use TikTok is because of brand loyalty,” they said. The unwelcome arrival of the TikTok Shop In September 2023, TikTok launched its TikTok Shop feature – an algorithm-driven in-app shopping experience in which users can buy products directly hawked by creators. The feature has a number of benefits for TikTok: it boosts monetization of its highly engaged audience, allowing users to make purchases without ever leaving the platform. Integrating shopping will also allow TikTok to compete with platforms like Instagram and Facebook, which have long integrated shopping capabilities, as well as with Chinese e-commerce sites like Temu and Shein, which promise cheap abundance. It is also part of a broader effort from TikTok to move away from politicized videos and other content that may jeopardize its tenuous position with regulators, many of whom believe it has been boosting pro-Palestinian content despite all evidence to the contrary. Some users have pushed back against the shop’s new omnipresence on the app, often characterized as a kind of QVC shopping channel for gen Z users, stating that it takes away from the fun, unique and interesting original content that earned TikTok its popularity. “The shopping push has not been very interesting or resonant in general, especially for younger users,” said Damian Rollison, director of market insights for digital marketing firm SOCi. “Shopping is not what appeals to US users on TikTok.” TikTok’s push of the shopping features, in spite of little interest from its audience, underscores the lack of say users and creators have over their favorite platforms and how they work. Creators report feeling pressure to participate in the shopping features lest their content get buried in the algorithm, said Duffy. “There is a tension for creators between gravitating towards what they think TikTok is trying to reward, and their own sense of what the most important and fulfilling kinds of content are,” she said. The magic algorithm – TikTok’s biggest asset (or liability) TikTok’s success has been largely attributed to its uncannily accurate algorithm, which monitors user behavior and serves related content on the “For You” page. According to a recent report, ByteDance would only consider selling the platform to comply with the new bill if it didn’t include the algorithm, which would make it nearly worthless. The algorithm, however, can be too responsive for some users. One friend told me they accidentally watched several videos of a niche Brazilian dance and their feed has been inundated with related content ever since. Conversely, I find if I spend less time on TikTok, when I log back in I find myself besieged with inside jokes that I am not quite in on – creators open monologues with “we’ve all seen that video about [fill in the blank]”. Most recently, my feed was filled with meta-memes commenting on a video about a series of videos about a Chinese factory I’d never heard of. “More so than any other platform. TikTok is very trend-based,” said Thom Gibson, lead social media strategist for ConvertKit. “It has its own kind of culture that you have to be tapped into in order to grow in a way you don’t see on platforms like Instagram Reels or YouTube Shorts.” The mystery of the algorithm is not unique to TikTok. Because social media platforms are not transparent about how they decide which content reaches users, it creates confusion and paranoia among creators about “shadow banning”, when content is demoted in the algorithm and shown less. “Because these algorithms are opaque and kind of concealed behind the screens, creators are left to discuss among themselves what the algorithm rewards or punishes,” said Duffy. “Companies like to act like they are neutral conduits that just reflect the interests and tastes of the audience, but, of course, they have a perverse level of power to shape these systems.” TikTok’s legacy Even if TikTok refuses to sell and shuts down forever, as its parent company seems to want, the app has left an indelible mark on the social media landscape and on the lives of the tens of millions who used it. Many users have stated they quit their traditional jobs to become full-time influencers, and will be financially devastated if TikTok disappears. In Montana, where a ban was passed (and later reversed) many such influencers lobbied aggressively against it. TikTok’s impact on me will continue in the form of countless pointless facts that are now buried deep in my brain: yesterday I spent 10 minutes of my life learning about the history of Bic pens. I watch ASMR – autonomous sensory meridian response – videos there when I am trying to fall asleep. BookTok influencers still give me legitimately enjoyable recommendations. The other day I laughed until I cried at this video. Entertaining drama remains, including one woman who was recently accused of pretending to be Amish to gain followers. I watched a cat give birth to a litter of kittens on TikTok Live just last week. The platform’s biggest legacy moving forward is the solidification of a demand for short-form videos, said Rollison – one that its competitors have yet to meet successfully. While Meta has invested heavily in Instagram Reels and Alphabet in YouTube Shorts, no platforms have found the secret sauce that TikTok has to keep users highly engaged. The Reels venture at Meta had been growing rapidly when the company last released numbers specific to the platform. In recent

earnings reports, Meta did not report Reels engagement numbers specifically, but its CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, said that Reels alone now makes up 50% of user time spent on Instagram. Still, the company said it is focusing on scaling the product, and not yet monetizing it. Alphabet has also declined to share recent numbers on its Shorts, but said in October the videos average 70bn daily views. Executives called the product a “long-term bet for the business” in Alphabet’s most recent earnings call. “TikTok is still the defining standard of success in the realm of short-form video,” Rollison said. “It has defined a need, and if it goes away, that is going to create a vacuum that will be filled by something. The need for short-form video will survive the death of any particular platform.” • This article was amended on 6 and 10 May 2024. It initially misattributed a quote from Thom Gibson to Nathan Barry, the CEO of ConvertKit. And an earlier version stated that the bill means ByteDance is required to sell TikTok to an American company; it is in fact required to sell the platform to a buyer that is not controlled by a “foreign adversary”, which includes China.