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How Quickly Can a Girl Go Viral on TikTok?

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11-14 minutes

Teens are making it big overnight, but that kind of fame can be a mixed bag.

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A girl sits alone on an ugly couch, stroking a plastic fish and mouthing the words to Jason Derulo's "Ridin' Solo." Her eyes are bloodshot. She puts on sunglasses to cover them up, just as Derulo says he does in the song.

This video, uploaded to TikTok in July, has more than 11.4 million views. It was posted by @mooptopia, who emerged from nowhere at the beginning of July and has since become an unexpected star. She now has 2.5 million followers, despite the fact that nothing about her account is remarkable: She's a teenager in what seems to be an average suburb, where she walks around and dances awkwardly and sometimes growls.

The most striking thing about this episode is how typical it is. Getting famous on TikTok can happen very quickly. In a matter of months, a highly driven teen can build an audience that translates into millions of dollars in endorsement deals; a bored weirdo can dress up as Waluigi and do the "WAP" dance, attracting more than 7 million views and starting a ridiculous new trend; a girl can take her first sip of kombucha and feel dramatically conflicted, becoming "Kombucha Girl." Young people go viral on social-media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram too, but TikTok is unique in how its algorithm pulls oddities out of the blue and pushes them into a main feed seen by millions of people. And many of those millions of people are teens. More than 40 percent of TikTok users are ages 16 to 24, and the Federal Trade Commission has alleged that a "significant" portion of users are even younger than that. Now, because of the pandemic—says Shauna Pomerantz, a Brock University professor who has studied TikTok—they're all spending more time on the app than they did before, which hadn't even seemed possible.

Far more girls are on TikTok than boys, and most of the teens achieving viral fame seem to be girls. "TikTok is so focused on goofiness, and all of the other platforms aren't," Pomerantz told me. "That's interesting for girls. There's a lot more freedom around what you can get away with." Girls have an inclination to worship other girls, which has led entire fandoms to pop up around even nonsensical videos such as Mooptopia's. But going viral can set up the potential for bizarre consequences and new pressures. When teens are suddenly hit with the less fun side of fame, it can be scary and confusing for both them and their parents, who might not know what their kids are up to at all.

Not much about Mooptopia suggests that she'd be a viral TikTok star, but she's as popular as the *most* popular girl in your high school, multiplied by a hundred thousand. Just a few of her videos: She strolls around a driveway, swaying to a jazz standard while holding a large stick; she works nails through the soles of a beat-up pair of Birkenstocks and walks around gingerly, soundtracked by Beyoncé's remix of Megan Thee Stallion's "Savage." Her most common move is scuttling toward the camera on all fours, like a possessed toddler. In what's perhaps her most artful work so far, she pairs Lana Del Rey's "Summertime Sadness" with a slow pan of her bathroom, then a close-up of red grapes dropping into the toilet, one by one. (Mooptopia did not respond to several requests for an interview.)

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When I asked Melanie Kennedy, a media researcher at the University of Leicester, in England, about the demand for TikTok for videos like this, she emphasized the popularity of "girl culture" on the platform. Many girls go from no followers to hundreds of thousands in a matter of days, in part because TikTok turns the kind of things they've been doing for decades—dancing in their bedroom, joking around with

their friends, fighting with their parents—"into a global spectacle," Kennedy argued. Every major cultural trend that has come from TikTok is a girl-culture trend: VSCO girls, e-girls, the dances created by girls and copied by other girls. By the numbers, Charli D'Amelio, a 16-year-old who has popularized many of the platform's biggest dance crazes, is about as famous on TikTok as Rihanna is on Instagram, and more famous than the president is on Twitter.

Some teenagers have gotten so famous that they now have devoted fandoms, much the same as pop stars or politicians. Faith Hall, a 20-year-old from Washington who runs a Mooptopia fan page on Tumblr, was drawn to Moop—whose username is abbreviated as such by her fans, because of the mystery. Unlike lots of other TikTok stars, she doesn't use her real name at all on the app. When her account took off in July, there were conspiracy theories about Moop, because she got so big with seemingly zero effort. She wasn't even using hashtags on her videos, the most common and obvious tactic for getting them more eyeballs.

Hall remembers the first Moop video she saw: Mooptopia was in a parking lot, mouthing the lyrics to a song and doing strange moves. "She's not doing anything, really," Hall told me. When I asked Hall what Mooptopia's fans see in her, she said a lot of outsiders were just taking the whole thing too seriously. "I think, honestly, it started as a joke between her and her friends, and then it started getting big because of TikTok's algorithm," she said. "I truly think people liked her just because she was doing her own thing and having fun."

Now dozens of Instagram accounts are dedicated to loving Mooptopia. The predominantly young girls who run the accounts—the first one I messaged was 14—adore her. They make fan art. They buy her used clothes on the resale app Depop, as well as the T-shirts and stickers she sells. They keep a history of each time she likes or comments on their content. They chart her growth on TikTok, congratulating her when she hits important milestones.

A small group of TikTok megastars have become actual celebrities: D'Amelio, who has accumulated 86 million followers in one year, has her own limited-time drink at Dunkin'. But networks of fan accounts exist for pretty much anyone who has made it big on the platform. Boys go viral too, but their fans appear disproportionately to be girls: A wealth of fan pages popped up for a 19-year-old named Duke Depp, who just this spring started dressing up as Johnny Depp's incarnation of Willy Wonka and has since gained 3.4 million fans. I clicked on one account at random and saw a blurry up-the-chin photo of a preteen girl in a beige bedroom who had layered text over her own face, "DUKE DEPP COMMENTED ON MY POST TONIGHT AND I'VE BEEN CRYING FOR 10 MINUTES NOW I CANNOT EXPRESS HOW MUCH I LOVE THIS MAN."

Teens were going viral long before TikTok even existed: Girls have often been tasked with providing a culture's levity, and younger girls have always looked up to older girls and tried to emulate them. In the aftermath of the Great Depression, millions found hope in the tap dances of Shirley Temple; the entertainment industry helped turn Britney Spears into an object for young girls to worship. But the speed with which this kind of fame can happen on TikTok comes with all sorts of new considerations.

The devotion and nonstop attention itself can be hard to contend with, especially for teens. They're treated like media products, and addressed as such, without the preparation that an actual celebrity would have. Mooptopia ran up against the pressures of fame within the first few weeks of grasping it. An old picture of her standing in front of a Donald Trump sign made the horde accuse her of secret MAGA loyalties; the natural curiosities of her enormous following led to amateur sleuths digging up her real name and the location of her high school; she showed up in a pervy subreddit dedicated to young TikTokers' feet. And fans haven't always liked the directions she's taken in her videos. As she experimented with slightly more typical TikTok dance routines and glamour shots, they complained: "Moop is slowly turning normal." Just a couple of weeks into her unlikely stardom, seemingly in response to all of this, she called it quits by posting a black screen with a text overlay reading in part, "It's been a hard time for me lately and i must part away from tiktok."

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Mooptopia came back only a few days after quitting TikTok. "Don't ever leave us again queen," her fans pleaded. Some fans have apologized for snooping, including the owner of an Instagram account dedicated to "rare" Moop pics from her childhood. "I guess i can't be a detective," they wrote with a crying-cat emoji. "Sorry queen." I was struck by the sincerity of the allegiance—something that was reserved for boy-band members and Disney Channel actors when I was a teenager.

For parents, there are some obvious reasons to be terrified of the power and public attention a teenager can accrue in a few days on a social-media app they don't totally understand. Audiences can be fickle

and demanding and mean; adults can be creepy and dangerous; and teenagers can lack foresight—they might not want to be known forever for the things they say online as a minor. Take, for example, 15-year-old Claudia Conway, who turned into an overnight star for posting to TikTok about her loathing for Trump and her irritation with her parents, especially her mother, Kellyanne Conway, a former senior counselor to the president. The type of family spat that would normally happen at the dinner table was instead followed by millions of people. Claudia posted multiple times about needing a break from the circus to focus on her mental health, and her parents both quit their jobs shortly after her account blew up. (George and Kellyanne Conway declined to comment on the record for this story; Claudia did not respond to a request for comment.) Other TikTok stars have spoken about being doxxed or harassed after becoming famous.

On top of that, parents could worry about the fact that the adulation of girls has rarely been equitable: As Kennedy pointed out in a recent paper, many of the most followed girls on TikTok are young, white, and wealthy. Young Black creators have protested their treatment on the app for some time. The platform, as Kennedy put it, "renders some girlhoods hypervisible and others hidden in their shadows."

But what can make TikTok so scary to parents is precisely what makes it so appealing to their kids. "TikTok is a lingua franca. It's a universal language among girls," Pomerantz said. "It's also a secret code, because adults often don't understand what their daughters are doing. I think those two things—the connectivity and the secret language of it—are what make it so attractive." For teens, the allure of TikTok isn't just viral fame, but also the promise of world-building with their peers.

TikTok is a massive network of girls talking primarily to one another, and by most available evidence, they understand what they're doing. Mooptopia has enough followers to start thinking about endorsements and off-platform success, but has deliberately staked out a very different path for reasons only she knows. TikTok's creator team says she isn't working with any of its in-house growth strategists to establish a bigger career. She may have achieved viral fame, and she may have felt its sting as well, but her story is still a mystery, just the way she seems to like it.

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