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TikTok: A Path to Stardom... Sort of

Giselle G. Medina

Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism

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Capstone Blurb

“TikTok: A Path to Stardom... Sort of” delves deep into one of the top social media apps. TikTok has gone beyond just being the “new vine,” becoming a marketing tool, whether for yourself or a product. This package will address going viral on the app and what it means to be a full-time content creator through gifs, an audio documentary, written words, and of course... TikToks.

A special thanks to Kalli Anderson for overseeing the entirety of this package, Kovie Biakolo for editing, and to all those who volunteered to share their experiences with TikTok. ❤️

Meet the Journalist Blurb

Photo Credit: Peter Senzamici

Hi, my name is Giselle Medina and I am the voice/writer behind this deep-dive on TikTok.

In December 2022, I received my M.A. in Journalism at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism with a concentration in Arts & Culture. I received my B.A. in December 2020 from Bernard M. Baruch College, where I studied Creative Writing Journalism with a minor in English. (A CUNY academic through and through!)

To engage more with my work, I have been [published](#) in Consumer Reports, Heritage Radio Network, the Hunts Point Express, the Mott Haven Herald, and the NYCity News Service.

Follow me on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#).

Footer: Giselle Medina for Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism, Fall 2022

TikTok and Viral Culture: An Audio Documentary Tab

Hashtags and Sounds and Algorithms OH MY! How TikTok Has Made Some People “Semi-Famous”

TikTok became popular in March 2020 during a time when many needed an escape from the harsh reality and the overwhelming nature that COVID-19 brought into our lives. But one of its perks? Going viral.

⚠️ CONTENT WARNING ⚠️

Themes involving anxiety and depression are present.

Accessible Script

This is the full script of the audio documentary including speaker names and links to what's being referenced.

Soft music fades in.

GISELLE MEDINA

Swipe... Swipe, Like... Swipe, Swipe... Swipe, Like, Share...

That's how I spend most of my time on TikTok.

Soft music fades out.

Right now, it's my most used app and Apple loves to remind me every Sunday how much time I spend on the app. I hate to admit it, but last week I spent a total of 21 hours and 7 minutes on TikTok. Think of any topic in the world. [PAUSE] Got it? Well, there's probably a niche “tok” for it. From books to food to even AC units - whatever you're into - you can find people on TikTok talking about it.

It felt like in March 2020, everyone was on this app. According to [Backlinko](#), a site that tracks SEO trends, Americans 18 and over spent more than a billion hours on the app in March 2020. On average, U.S. adult users were spending 33 minutes per day on TikTok, just two minutes less than Facebook. But that's just an AVERAGE – a lot of people were spending HOURS a day on the app. I asked some friends to check their phones to see how many hours they logged per week on the app:

BRIANNA FRANCOIS

TikTok is my most used app with a weekly average of just under 12 hours.

TATIANA KRISZTINA

6 hours 36 minutes

ALEXIS NORMANDIA

15 hours

MAURICIO HERNANDEZ

Around 20 hours and 40 minutes.

GISELLE MEDINA

That last one made me feel a bit better about my 21-hour weekly average. With TikTok's rising popularity, content creators on the app have been racking up huge followings, especially during the first COVID-19 lockdown. There was no more rushing to work or school, we were stuck at home waiting for normalcy to come back.

BRYAN MONTANEZ

I had never dealt with anxiety, depression, all that- like mental illness until COVID happened. I let myself go mentally, physically, emotionally in all sorts. And I think TikTok was a fun way of just making an outlet. Um, my videos originally started blowing up when I was just going on rants and talking crazy, and it definitely helped with my emotional state at the time.

GISELLE MEDINA

That was Bryan Montanez. Bryan is originally from Puerto Rico. He moved to Florida at the age of 16, then moved to Missouri for college to play baseball. Now, he lives in Washington Heights pursuing a modeling career with the modeling agency, Next Management. Which all happened after he started posting on TikTok.

BRYAN MONTANEZ

It took me about three months before my first video ever blew up. And I still remember that video the same week that my first video started going crazy on TikTok. Uh, someone by the name of Jhendi Castillo, which is my mother agent Uh, contact me on Instagram and was like,

“yo, I’m this and that a mother agent. And there’s a client of mine that wants to sign you to his agency.” At first, I thought it wasn’t real at all. I thought it was like, you know, just the scam or something. And the more I looked into it, the more real it seem.

GISELLE MEDINA

He now has around [538 thousand followers with around 23 million likes](#).

During lockdown, you saw people go viral and in the next couple of weeks have thousands of followers.

New Yorker Luis Barbosa is another content creator who knows what it’s like to go suddenly viral. In February 2020, he posted a video on TikTok with a friend not expecting anything to come out of it.

LUIS BARBOSA

We were at Chelsea piers and I think we were playing basketball and we were coming back home from his, uh, from, uh, we’re going back to his house. Um, and we passed by this like salon and there’s a cat in the window and it’s just like chilling there. So. I was just like, you know, I’m gonna just make like a joking video. So I take my phone out and I’m like yelling at the cat. I’m like, Hmm, who left you there...

The [TikTok Luis is referencing plays...](#)

Where’s your owner? They just left you here? We’re gonna save you!

And I’m just yelling at the cat and the cat is just staring at me like, like dead eyes. And we were just like making jokes about that. And now we went from like 10K and I got to like, I think 45K in a night, like, uh, followers. So I jumped a lot. That one, I was like, okay, I jumped a lot on this one. And that one was the one that solidified, like I should be making videos.

GISELLE MEDINA

Luis now has [1.5 million followers with around 72 million likes](#). He’s always wanted to go viral on an app, and saw TikTok as the best way to do so.

According to the trend-spotting website [ExplodingTopics](#), 25% of U.S. TikTok users are 10 to 19 years old. Which is the Gen-Z age demographic.

Sammy Wrogé is the founder of the talent management agency, [Good Company Creations](#). Her clients are all on TikTok, and finds the app to be the best when it comes to marketing.

SAMMY WROGÉ

Because I feel like almost everyone's on it, and if they're not on it, then they see the TikToks on Instagram.

GISELLE MEDINA

But to stand out, Sammy found that...

SAMMY WROGÉ

...if you have a specific niche on TikTok, you tend to do better rather than posting a bunch of random content because people wanna follow you for like your niche or like what you're interested in.

GISELLE MEDINA

The point here is, just about any topic can make you go viral on TikTok - and it's very hard to predict when it will happen. When it started, TikTok only allowed you to create 15-second videos, so content creators had to grab viewers' attention quickly. Now, videos can go for as long as 10 minutes. Making a TikTok takes time and effort. Creators have to strategize about when to post their videos. Luis studied his algorithm and he posts exactly at 9:32 P.M.

LUIS BARBOSA

I was like, thinking about myself, like, when am I usually on my phone? If you have like a busy day the next day, or like early classes or whatever, or like, if you're like a kid with a bedtime, you're most likely going to bed around like 10 like 10:30, 11. So, I feel like 9:32 was like a calm spot in between like getting home showering and just like resting in bed and just like being on your phone, like doing nothing. So then I posted like 9:30 and then the video kind of did okay. I posted at 9:32 and then that video did like numbers. Like, um, like I think it did like 4 million, then the next day I pulled out like 9:35, the video did okay. So then I was like, maybe we should just post at 9:32, I post at 9:32 another viral video.

GISELLE MEDINA

To keep that momentum going, content creators have to be consistent.

MACKENZIE SKYE

For TikTok, people say that you should post like three times a day.

GISELLE MEDINA

That was Mackenzie Skye, a content creator from North Carolina with [309 thousand followers and 8 million likes](#). She's working towards being a full-time content creator and noticed when she wasn't posting as frequently, she'd lose followers. This past November, she and her manager, Sammy,

MACKENZIE SKYE

...came up with a plan and a posting schedule for me to kind of stick to, to kind of get more traction. So, um, we're hoping that I'll start gaining followers again and can actually do more brand deals that are paid.

GISELLE MEDINA

This schedule consists of posting a TikTok a day or something for Instagram. In just a month, she has noticed an increase in views.

But why is TikTok the best app to “blow up” on?

[Akinola Raymond](#) started his social media journey in 2010 wanting to become famous on YouTube then Instagram and now TikTok. Akinola downloaded TikTok in 2019 a bit after it was [changed from Musical.ly in 2018](#). He's a part of the TikTok partner program. That means someone in the TikTok creative team works directly with him giving him tips on his content. And there's so many perks. TikTok will help you if get hacked, tell you the new trends and hashtags coming in and occasionally you get invited to events in L.A.

Being on multiple social media apps for so long and having this connection as a TikTok partner helped him understand the app's algorithm and what it takes to go viral. And that's...

AKINOLA RAYMOND

...if you put a hashtag or go to the people who like that sort of hashtag.

GISELLE MEDINA

The first 500 likes and views are key, then once the video gets to 1,000 it can start to go viral really quickly.

AKINOLA RAYMOND

So it goes of those 500 people more narrowed down and then like it takes them to like they like if like, let's say a 10th of them like it. It'll go to the next batch to a thousand people. That's how you really get viral. Like the first 500 likes you get and then after that it's like depend on how good the video is is pretty much anybody can get viral.

GISELLE MEDINA

I contacted TikTok to request an interview on how their algorithm works and how to gain more recognition on the app. Instead of an interview, their press-person sent me multiple sections of their website. Their [“What is the ‘For You’ feed?”](#) page on their website has three videos with tips for going viral.

The tips include adding captions and hashtags ... making sure to film vertically ... and paying attention to trends ... Naturally.

Akinola has found that once a video...

AKINOLA RAYMOND

...goes to 50,000 likes or views, there's like a moderator who looks at the content to make sure like, it's not going to get in trouble.

GISELLE MEDINA

And making sure the video doesn't go against their community guidelines. TikTok would not comment on whether they pay more attention to content with a lot of engagement. They referred me again to the “What is the ‘For You’ feed?” page and the [“Content violations and bans”](#) page on their website. Essentially, the types of things that will get flagged or removed from TikTok include quote “overly erotic” content ... anything promoting tobacco products, extreme dieting, or dangerous stunts ... and they also flag distressing or violent images.

And to help out with overseeing their content, some creators have managers. Andrea Fernandez is the founder, and CEO of the [Transformation PR](#). She represents multiple content creators, like [Dosso Beauty](#) and [Dane Richards](#). Aside from studying TikTok herself, Andrea has someone on

her team that researches what's trending from sounds to videos. With the content creators she represents, Andrea will give points of advice of what she thinks will work for them.

ANDREA FERNANDEZ

If I'm scrolling through social media and I see something that maybe it might not be trending, but I feel like it's something that has the potential to do really well and the potential to trend, then I'll just hit them up and I'll say, "Hey, like this is something you should look into. It's very on brand with what you do and with your content." Or like, "This person did this, but I think you could do it better if you like tweak this a little bit and like, this is something that could really hit."

GISELLE MEDINA

For those who DO manage to go viral on TikTok - it can be life-changing. In the past couple of years, we've seen a bunch of TikTok stars score invites to the Oscars, movie premieres, and things like that. It's an app that has jump-started people's acting or modeling careers. Bryan witnessed this firsthand back in 2021 when he did...

BRYAN MONTANEZ

...[Steve Madden's holiday campaign](#). It was, um, it was actually a really funny story. I had COVID I had the Delta Variant, um, back in August and I was coming straight out of the sickness. It was like my 13th day or something.

GISELLE MEDINA

Bryan gets a call from his manager, to send a video pretending to accept an award. But still, the reality of being bedridden because of COVID and not working hit him hard.

BRYAN MONTANEZ

I've been inside of my apartment with major anxiety for the past 13 days. Cause I didn't even know if I was going to have a job after I came out of quarantine. And I was just like, I was at my lowest point. I was like, maybe New York is not for me. Yada, yada, yada. Um, I sent the video. I looked horrible, but I gave it my all. And a couple of days later, I got the call. It was like, and I'll never forget the tone in his voice because I landed us. What was it? A \$7,000 job. And he just said, 'Hey, Bryan, how you doing? You just got green lit for Steve Madden and the money is this, this and that.' And, uh, you're good. And I was like, okay. And then I hung up the phone and I'm pretty sure that people in Uptown heard me when I was screaming.

GISELLE MEDINA

When it comes to TikTok, like any social media app, it can be addicting. I find myself bringing up a video that I had just watched on TikTok during any conversation. In this very digital age, social media is at our fingertips.

Soft music fades in.

And this app went from trendy dances to a tool for marketing yourself. Just look at what's done for all these content creators. For many, it became their path to almost fame like seeing themselves as the face of fashion campaigns.

BRYAN MONTANEZ

When I got the modeling job, [it] changed everything ... I was just a baseball player that got picked up.

Soft music fades out.

TikTok and Full-Time Content Creators: A Culture Report Tab

It's Easy To Influence but Is It Easy to Be a Full-Time Influencer?

After almost two years on TikTok, I have come to the conclusion that it can influence me to do anything. I have saved so many TikTok videos on Trader Joe's finds, hair and make-up products, and all the restaurants I want to go to in New York City. Saving these videos has expanded my knowledge and led me to try different things that I otherwise wouldn't have (I've even learned how to make muffins, properly dermaplane my skin, and keep my curls shiny).

Since its rebranding from [Musical.ly to TikTok in 2018](#), the short-form video hosting service has become the most downloaded app in the world surpassing 3.5 billion downloads according to an April 2022 report by [analytics firm Sensor Tower](#). The social media platform has gone from a “dancing app” to a marketing tool for some people. It has had a significant cultural influence specifically among [Gen-Z, in this new media generation](#). Consequently, going viral on TikTok has become a way for people to earn income and even build entire careers.

A prime example of a full-time TikTok content creator is Jae Gurley. In a [video](#) responding to a fan's question on how they got into TikTok, Gurley gave a list of tips on their journey. To sum up their response: pick a brand/niche and stick to it. Before ending the video, they say, “but seriously being a content creator is a job of a lifetime.”

What it means to be a content creator never crossed my mind until my cousin, Mauricio Hernandez, started to really pursue it towards the end of 2019. He went from posting his hair routine on [TikTok](#) to walking in New York Fashion Week two years in a row. Now 20, he has done a couple of brand deals with companies like Nike, Jimmy Jazz, and [Urban Skin Rx](#). These are essentially brand partnerships where a content creator collaborates with a brand in exchange for money or a stipend.

According to the ["Creating Branded Content on TikTok"](#) page on TikTok's website, “when a creator chooses to make a branded post, they are leveraging their followers and audience — an audience a brand may not otherwise have access to — in exchange for earning compensation from the brand.”

“If there's brands that I want to work with, but they maybe haven't reached out to me. Sometimes I'll spend a day emailing them with my rates and my portfolio and just being like, ‘Here's what I can do, I'd love to partner together,’” says full-time content creator Brandon Edelman who now has a little over [340 thousand followers with 37 million likes](#) on the app. Just as on Instagram and other social media platforms, getting likes matter. They help to grow one's “account

exponentially by multiplying the reach of your posts,” according to social media trend tracker [EAZYSMM](#). “And if more people engage with your content, you make more money.”

After downloading TikTok in January 2021, Edelman’s whole brand has been “gay chaos” which is basically him out with his friends and “talking about dating and being in your twenties and drinking culture, hookup culture, relationship advice.” It’s like being on FaceTime with a friend with Edelman making sure his face is the center of the camera, his language informal and laid back.

But Edelman didn’t start off as a full-time content creator. He had a couple of jobs in the past year, with his most recent being the social media manager for a company that had reached out to him because of his TikTok presence. But, he didn’t like the constraints that came with making TikTok videos for a company. According to him, it wasn’t “creative stimulating.”

“I never felt like I had a direction or a clear path of where I wanted to grow, whereas now I feel amazing about where I am and I love my job and there’s so many different avenues in terms of growth,” Edelman says. “It’s nice to see the work you put in directly reflect. What comes out in 9-to-5 culture, I felt sometimes I’d work really hard and not get recognition, but now working for myself, when I see a video go viral and I did that or like, when I see people responding to something in a positive way, I’m like, that was really good on my part.”

As a full-time content creator, Edelman went from a 9-to-5 job to a 24-hour one. “I film everything I do,” he says. His mornings consist of meetings, filming two videos a day, brainstorming future content, filming ads, replying to comments (either with a video or just a text comment), and going to events.

Usually, Edelman or his manager will send an email introducing themselves and attaching his analytics including his viewership and his audience’s demographic. “Businesses are gonna wanna see if that matches their clientele and the customer that they’re trying to reach,” he says.

However, it is more common for brands to come to content creators.

Malibu Rum approached Edelman’s manager to attend their activation/booth for the Firefly Music Festival which happened towards the end of September 2022. Edelman only needed to create an [Instagram reel](#) promoting the brand's setup at the festival. “The process was pretty seamless,” says Edelman. “We had a call with the Malibu team for them to run through what to expect at the booth and discussing concepts for the reel. I suggested incorporating Malibu into a “Day in My Life” video and they loved that idea so that is what we did.”

Due to legalities, Edelman could not share the payment amount. But when creating the content, the reel took about 1.5 hours to make — a half hour to film and an hour to edit the raw footage. He was also able to travel to Delaware and attend three out of the four days of the festival in order to complete the partnership.

“A lot of brands want different things at different times,” says content creator Mackenzie Skye. She’s had partnerships where the brands work very closely with her right down to the formulation of captions while others give her full creative freedom as long as the content in the video is discussed beforehand.

Skye joined TikTok in 2019, a time when TikTok was slowly becoming more popular before fully becoming a top social media app during the pandemic. She now has almost [309 thousand followers with 8 million likes](#). Around 2-3 years ago, she did a month-long partnership with North Face. They sent her a variety of winter gear including a big winter jacket, a thinner jacket, a duffle bag, leggings, and a shirt. Skye was told to go on hiking trips, and use specific viral sounds and captions to build the content for them - content that took her roughly 5-6 hours to create. Sometimes she’d have to redo videos if the logo didn’t really show or something wasn’t aesthetically pleasing. “I feel it’s like that with any brand that you work with because you have to send in [the videos] and make sure that it’s accepted and approved before they’re like, ‘Okay, go ahead and post that,’” says Skye. And from that month-long deal, she was paid around \$1,000 and kept all the items, still wearing today the thinner yellow and black zip-up coat.

In her experience, brand deal payments vary from \$500 to \$5,000 if not more for just one video. This was easy living for Skye three years ago when she lived with her mom. For independence, she moved out, and to sustain her life in North Carolina, she’s gone from full-time content creator to working as a receptionist at a hair salon. With working around 24 hours a week and babysitting during her free time, TikTok has been on the back burner for Skye.

“At one point, I stopped working completely because I was like, ‘I want to do social media, I want to put all my time into this,’ but the brand deals weren’t coming in fast enough to pay my bills,” she says. “So right now, I definitely could not pay my bills with social media, like absolutely not because the brand deals have not been as much.”

But as many full-time content creators emphasize, in order to make it your full-time income, consistency is key. In pursuit of this as a full-time career, Skye has a calendar that her manager Sammy Wroge created to gain more follower traction. “We’re hoping that I’ll start gaining followers again and can actually do more brand deals that are paid.”

Beyond brand deals, there’s the TikTok Creator Fund - the app’s way of “celebrating and supporting creators for their dedication, ingenuity, and spirit,” according to the app’s [website](#).

The \$200 million fund launched in July 2020 with a seemingly straightforward proposal: apply, make a video, and get money.

However creators have to meet certain criteria in order to apply: they have to be 18 years or older, have a minimum of 100,000 views, have three posts in the past month, have 10,000 followers, and follow community guidelines. However, upon its launch, there were [conspiracies](#) alleging that TikTok doesn't pay their creators and even some people have suggested that creators in the fund have had their viewership go down. The content creator needs views to get the Creator Fund coin. But there is no evidence to prove these claims and TikTok has [denied](#) it. "Being in the Creator Fund has no direct impact on the TikTok recommendation system," TikTok says in their September 2020 statement. "On TikTok, For You feed recommendations reflect preferences unique to each user and the recommendation system doesn't know whether or not a creator is part of the Creator Fund." In the first place, the statement asserts that TikTok is not deliberately bringing down one's viewership, a video gets more recognition based on the views and likes the video is gaining. Secondly, the statement also says funds are calculated based on factors like video views, video engagement, and authenticity of a view. Ending their statement with "like video views, funds are therefore dynamic," meaning that it depends on viewership and is different for each content creator.

Edelman joined the fund over a year ago as another source of income. "Before I had brand deals, it was encouraging me to continue to post," he says, "because I was like, 'Hey, I can get like an extra \$300 this month just from posting on TikTok,' at that time I was making 40K a year at my job." In a [TikTok video](#) posted in July, Edelman breaks it down. In a year, he made \$5,000 from being in the fund, which makes it clear that creators cannot exactly live off the fund.

"If this was my yearly salary, obviously I wouldn't be alive right now," he says in the video. "I would never ever recommend anybody quitting their job and relying solely on TikTok Creator Fund money."

For Edelman, he sees Creator Fund money to be more of a passive stream of income in addition to brand partnerships, helping pay a portion of rent or a coffee, not something to heavily rely on. "But it's always good," he says. "Money's great, so it's always good to have."

When it comes to TikTok, as viewers, we are shown a somewhat romanticized version of what it's like being a content creator from seeing their name-brand unboxing videos to being invited to special events because of the number of followers they have. The social media app has become a full-time job with building a following and constantly creating original content. And without really intending to, at first, content creators have become catalysts for influencing people.