



GETTY. ILLUSTRATION BY WESLEY JOHNSON.

Culture

The History of TikTok

The app that crowdsources popularity via video engagement is the new "it" platform for aspiring artists.

BY STARRENE RHETT ROCQUE

AUGUST 29, 2019

Welcome to Teen Vogue's Meme Week. We've cooked up stories all about internet culture, viral stars, memes, and more from the deepest corners of the internet.

Last February, TikTok user Montero Hill, whose alias was Lil Nas X, uploaded a song entitled, "Old Town Road" to the wildly popular app. It started out as a meme that went so viral that record labels took notice. Eventually, country music legend, Billy Ray Cyrus, found his way on to a remix of the song. "Old Town Road," then became the longest-running

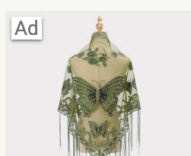
number-one hit on [the Billboard Hot 100](#) and held steady for 19 weeks, dethroning Mariah Carey, before Billie Eilish dethroned him. It went on to be remixed several times with features by BTS, Young Thug, and Mason Ramsey.

Initially, Lil Nas X had been promoting his song on several social media channels with minimal success, but the song's catchy beat and hook caught on with TikTok's community under the hashtags, [#cowboygang](#) and [#yeeyeejuice](#). TikTok's culture is designed for its users to help each other get popular quickly, so success on the app isn't unusual or as hard to come by as on other social media networks. [Ava Max](#), [Supa Dupa Humble](#), and [The BoyBoy West Coast](#) are among other artists who have seen a meteoric rise to stardom by utilizing the app's quirky conventions.

TRENDING NOW

Young People Respond to the Manchester Bombing

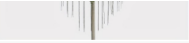
"I found out about [Doja Cat] through TikTok," Drea Okeke, another immensely popular TikTok user, also known as [Drea Knowsbest](#) tells *Teen Vogue* about the "Moo (B*tch I'm a Cow)" singer whose song [went viral](#) from TikTok users' covers. "When there's a trend or challenge, people are doing the same thing to the song so when you hear that song you know it's from TikTok, and you want to go listen to [full] the song. Saweetie 'My Type' is a huge track right now [on TikTok]. People are making videos about their type. A lot of rappers are blowing up [on TikTok] and people love it! A lot of female rappers too. If people aren't getting brand deals, they're getting song partnership deals."



Butterfly Embroidered Fashion Elegant...

Temu





Drea, who has amassed 3.2 million followers since TikTok's re-launch last summer, frequently uploads comedic videos and works with multiple brands like **Chipotle**, **Peace Tea**, **McDonald's**, and more. The Los Angeles-resident credits her success to being authentic but also collaborating with various users around the world.

"It's a global app so you can actually see the analytics and you can see where people are seeing your videos from," she says. "It's so much cooler than other apps [and] it helps out with Gen Z as they're growing up. [They're] not going to be so closed-minded."

TikTok was previously Musical.ly, where people would upload lip-synch videos. In 2018, a Chinese tech company, ByteDance, **acquired Musical.ly** and merged it with its own lip-synching app, known as Douyin. The result was TikTok, which debuted last August. By September 2018, it had surpassed Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and SnapChat in monthly installs, **with more than one billion downloads**.

TikTok staff, and its users, **60 percent of whom are 16-24 (in the US)**, describe it as a collaborative space where it's easier to go viral than other social platforms. TikTok's appeal is the endless display of 15-second videos featuring campy special effects, dancing reaction videos, and trending hashtags like **#ThatsMyType**, **#HeyGirl**, **#EGirls**, and **#EBoys** that are reflective of various subcultures represented on the app — no matter how random — including what Drea describes as a "weird obsession with Peppa Pig."

"There was this one girl who was doing a popular dance, and she didn't do it right and people started making that into a whole challenge to do it like that girl. And when she went to this convention, people saw her and she was doing it with them and laughing as opposed to other platforms where people would criticize you," Drea says. "It's just a positive fun space."

That crowdsourced popularity is the result of a discovery page that doesn't rely on a follower count, but rather, trends, popular jokes, and a shared feed that offers a more equal opportunity shot at fame. Eventually, users will begin to see more videos tailored to what they click on the most. It's no coincidence that many popular TikTokers like Drea and Andre Swilley used to be part of the Vine community.

"It fills a hole that Vine left [and] that Snapchat never had the functionality to fill," says Patrice Callender, a digital brand manager and

functionality to him], says Talice Canider, a digital brand manager and social media strategist. “The time limit, people loving viral challenges, ease of use when it comes to discovering new accounts [make it appealing. I think its visibility, even when you don’t have a large number of followers — and for the Lil Nas X’s and Doja Cat’s who have had songs catch on and go viral, fun lyrics and a moment that’s meme-able or a challenge can be made of it [are what people love].”

ADVERTISEMENT

In the ancient days of social media, artists utilized MySpace and even Twitter to bombard users with links that most likely got ignored because they were shared in spammy and disingenuous ways. Now, meme’able hits that are catchy, fun, easy to understand, and easy to dance to are new, “Listen to my mixtape.”

Andre Swilley, a TikToker with over 6.3 million followers, has a massive teenage fanbase. He found success as an actor and is currently shooting a web series as a result of his TikTok presence. He is also a rapper. While his initial focus was acting, his song and subsequent dance challenge, “Pistol,” took off enough to inspire him to keep his music going as part of his repertoire.

“My main focus has been acting,” Swilley says. “I just got into [music] this year to be honest. I didn’t do much with my other songs but with ‘Pistol,’ I put it out there [on TikTok] and the challenge helped it so much more. If you want help with your music or just anything with your platform, you definitely have to get on TikTok because it’ll help you with all of your platforms for your career. Whatever you want to do in the industry it will help you.”

KEYWORDS

TIKTOK

INTERNET FAME

POP CULTURE

LIL NAS X

READ MORE
