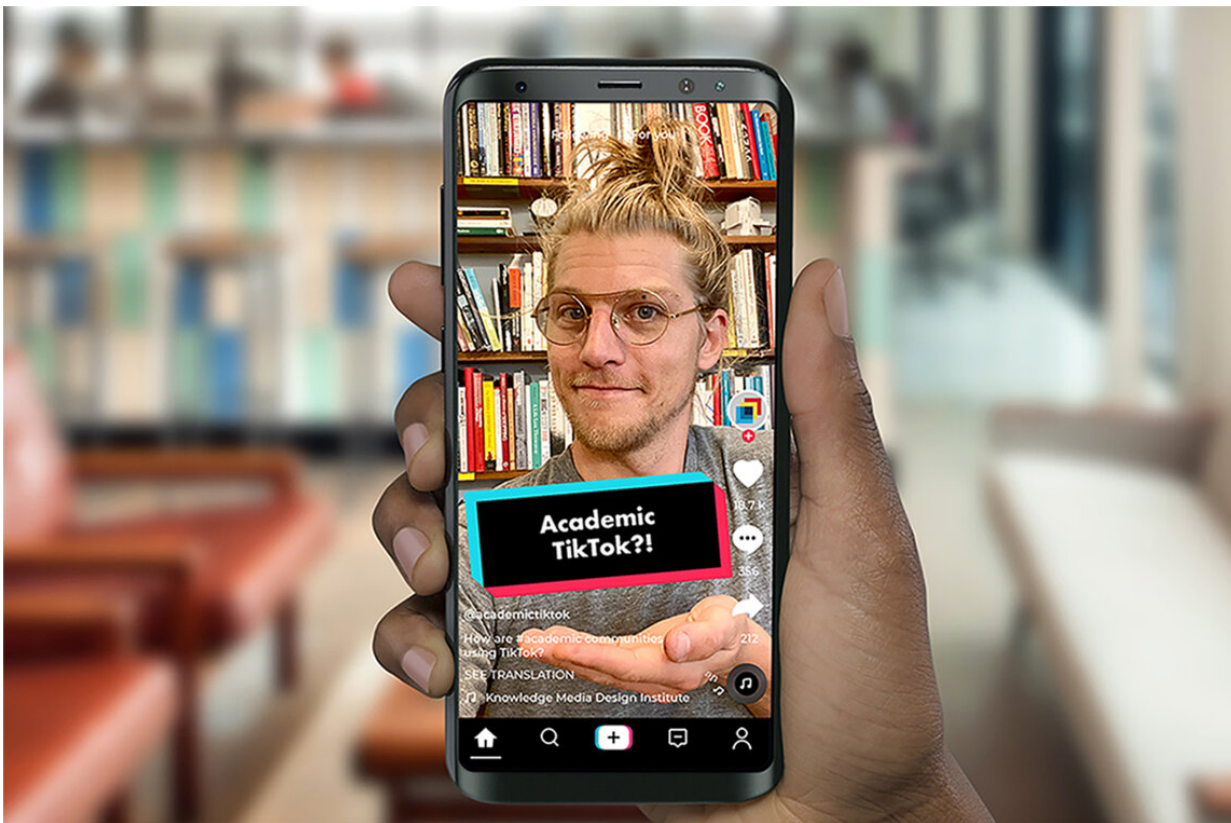


Researchers study TikTok platform's use in academia

November 17 2021, by Rekha Morbia



Credit: KMDI

In a bid to shine a spotlight on their research and make it more accessible, academics around the world are following in the footsteps of their students and taking to TikTok to share videos.

The trend is being highlighted by a team of researchers at the Knowledge Media Design Institute (KMDI) at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Information. The researchers looked at the different ways academics, educators and scholarly communities are using TikTok, the popular [social media](#) platform that specializes in short-form user-generated videos, to share knowledge—from [Gothic architecture explainers](#) to [weight loss tips](#).

In particular, the researchers examined user behavior, concerns about youth engagement, data and privacy implications, the technical features of the app and the visual aspect of scholarly contribution.

"If watching YouTube is like sitting in a lecture, then using TikTok is like having a conversation," says study co-lead JP King, a sessional instructor at the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design who works as KMDI's data visualization and graphic designer. "TikTok provides a fun place to create new forms of accessible learning shared outside of classrooms, textbooks, and conference halls.

Led by King and Associate Professor Sara Grimes, director of KMDI, four graduate students with an interest in critical media literacy reviewed TikTok videos made by academics for the study. The team also analyzed more than 100 journal articles, books and [research papers](#) focused on TikTok, social media, technology and digital rights. Their study recommends some best practices for academics using TikTok, which ranks as the fourth most popular social media platform after YouTube, Snapchat and Instagram.

The researchers found that TikTok videos often tend to be "amateurish" and offer a peek behind the scenes. The estimated 20 million-plus daily users, who are mostly under 30, embrace a less professional approach and don't feel the need to make everything perfect. They may simply record themselves with their smartphones with no special lighting or

makeup. While this might feel out of place on Instagram or YouTube, it is acceptable if not expected on TikTok.

TikTok is also unique in how it encourages active engagement. Users can remix one another's videos or produce creative responses towards others' content. At the same time, however, users risk having their video or audio remixed or repurposed without their permission if they don't adjust their privacy settings accordingly.

"You might make a sincere video explaining your research that someone else turns into a song or a joke," the study warns academics. "Decide now if you're comfortable with that possibility."

The study's authors attributed the phenomenon at least partly to a generational shift around intellectual property. Without bibliographies or citations, TikTok videos can challenge the sense of ownership that academic communities have traditionally had around ideas. "It's more difficult to maintain ownership of your ideas online, and you can't control how people will use your imagery or audio. Researchers must be aware of this fact, and be thoughtful when they are publishing content," King says.

The researcher say that academics also need to understand the large impact that a single video could have on their personal brand. If their personal views clash with institutional values, there could be pushback from the academic community and repercussions from administrators. Even though tenured faculty members have academic freedom, they may not get a free pass if they use TikTok in ways their colleagues consider out of line, the researchers warn.

What's more, an outsized social media profile won't necessarily enhance a scholar's professional status. "In simple terms, a million followers won't guarantee you tenure or a promotion," says King.

Above all, it's a way to spread the word, possibly dispelling popular myths with facts and encouraging an audience to think about a topic from a different perspective. Casey Fiesler, an assistant professor at the University of Colorado Boulder, runs [a popular TikTok account](#) that often challenges viewers to consider the problems with Facebook's domination of the online experience. It's possible to imagine a teenager finding one of Fiesler's videos tucked between dance trends and dog tricks and questioning Facebook for the first time, according to King.

"TikTok offers enormous potential for the discovery of critical ideas," he says. "This is why using TikTok effectively is crucial. Sharing research with an audience outside of the academy brings together people with diverse educational backgrounds. TikTok offers an exciting new way to find like-minded thinkers, makes research accessible, and start important conversations."

Here are a few of the study's recommendations for [best practices](#) on how scholarly communities can engage:

- Keep your videos short and simple: Less than one minute is ideal because online attention spans are shorter than in-person ones
- Use storytelling and humor to make your content more accessible: You are competing with all the other content online, so lighten the mood by telling a story or adding unique humor
- Find ways to engage people instead of speaking to them: Invite users to try out an experiment for themselves and create a video reply with their results
- Get your data from TikTok so you know what's being tracked. Remember social media lives forever: You might be surprised by how well TikTok knows you. Download your data and decide for yourself if you are comfortable with TikTok having this information and selling it without your knowledge
- Be aware that your video or audio may be remixed or repurposed

without your permission, unless you change your privacy settings:
You might make a sincere [video](#) explaining your research that
someone else turns into a song or a joke. Decide now if you're
comfortable with that possibility

Provided by University of Toronto

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