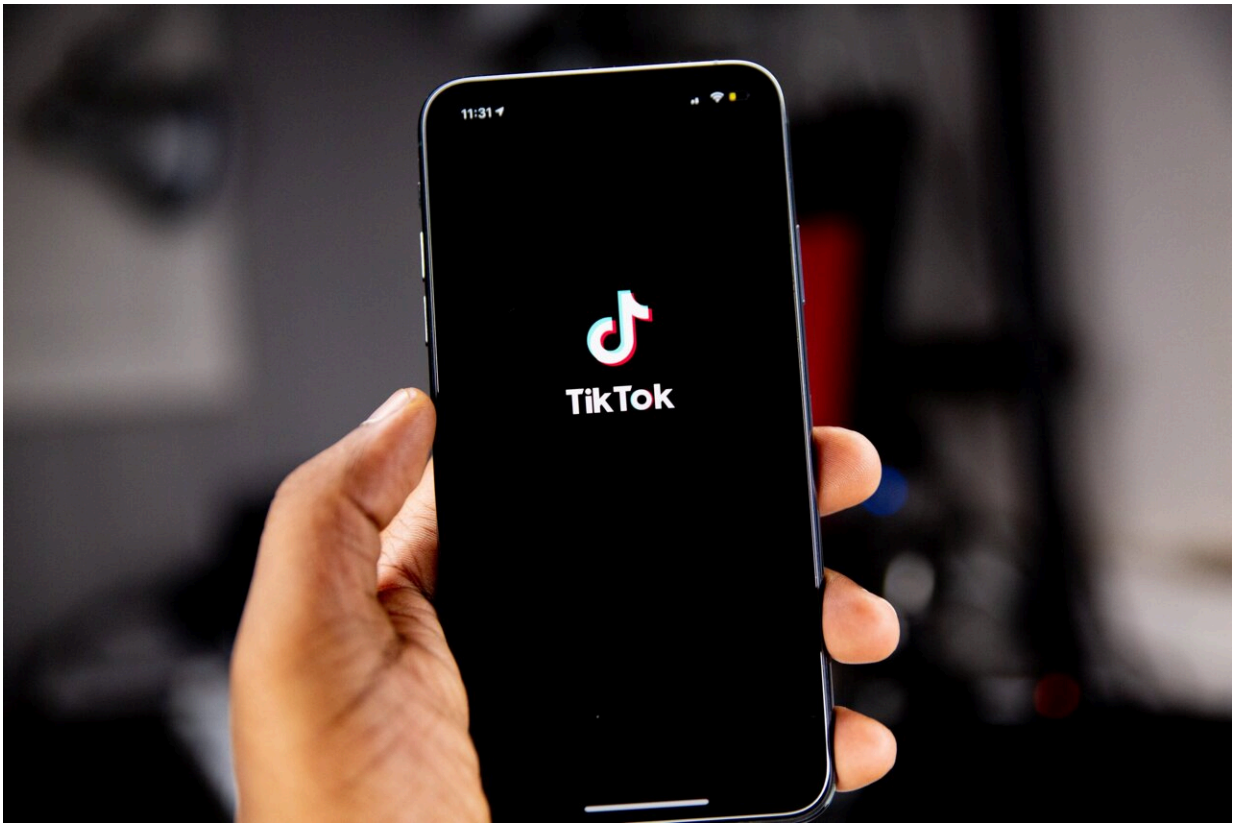


Q&A: Potential TikTok ban is a high-stakes threat for its young user base and beyond

April 1 2024, by Sian Wilkerson



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The popular social media app TikTok is facing an uncertain future in the U.S. amid concerns about national security. In Congress, the House passed a bill recently that would lead to a nationwide ban of the platform

if its China-based owner, ByteDance, doesn't sell off its stake.

The bill's prospects are less certain in the Senate, though President Joe Biden said he would sign it—and it could take effect within six months. But what would a TikTok ban mean for its more than 150 million U.S. users, and how would influencers and brands be affected?

Joshua Smith, an assistant professor in Virginia Commonwealth University's Richard T. Robertson School of Media and Culture in the College of Humanities and Sciences, said lawmakers should be asking that question.

TikTok has its own social media ecosystem made up of primarily young (Gen Z) users, Smith said. Thanks in part to its diverse collection of available music and its short-form content model, as well as the visual variety and unique way that users can interact with one another, the platform's grip on the youth base is strong, with Gen Z spending upwards of two hours a day on the app.

"TikTok's algorithm has made the platform stand out," Smith said. "The For You Page (FYP) brings users closer to the stuff that matters to them most and adapts to how their interests are evolving while they use the app. The near-instant virality of videos and videos taken from multiple perspectives makes full-blown, international trends come and go in days—not weeks or months."

VCU News spoke with Smith about TikTok and what a ban could mean for U.S. users.

For context, what is TikTok's role in the wider cultural landscape?

This won't truly be known for years, but between 2019 and now, TikTok has become central to youth-based [social movements](#). There are researchers looking at the phenomena of how much more time was spent on TikTok than on any other social media during lockdowns associated with COVID-19, when the spike was so large and pervasive that some scholars are showing negative health-based outcomes due to a lack of physical activity resulting from the hours of time users spent on the app.

But what were they doing? Many of them were jumping into [current events](#), connecting with friends, seeking social support and trying to maintain a sense of normalcy while they were stuck inside. TikTok was the starting place of many youth-supported social movements happening during that time. I believe many [young people](#) sought connection through TikTok and developed an affinity for the app that carried into the present day, though we won't know this empirically for years.

If you look at social advocacy issues and connect them to TikTok, you'll find a huge collection of young individuals who are conversation starters, not just post sharers. Many social advocacy issues, such as Black Lives Matter, gun reform, environmental issues, women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, health care and immigration, are widely discussed on TikTok because TikTok is the place where Gen Z feel comfortable sharing and discussing their world. Opinions, attitudes and beliefs get formed on TikTok.

It took a lot of refinement to get to where it is now and to become a more trusted platform, but the algorithm isn't perfect. The app has been called out by the media and users for prioritizing FYP content based on users' looks, their race and their choice of words, which has brought needed attention to bias in algorithmic value systems.

In broad terms, how do organizations or businesses

use TikTok most effectively for reaching an audience?

Brands don't really belong on TikTok; people do. Social media apps are designed to facilitate peer-to-peer interaction. Brands jump on these platforms to get market share, but brands aren't people—they don't have a face, per se. Thus, they fit diagonally on most platforms, including TikTok.

If brands want to participate in the conversation, they either need real people such as users and influencers to help them, or they have to run ads. It's easy to buy media flights on TikTok, but the content falls short. Most people don't want to see ads. Young people in particular are quick to spot the word "sponsored" and to hit the skip button. This is where the magic of influencers comes in.

Influencers are real and trusted people. Whether they're funny or serious, these are people who get watched, liked and followed, driving engagement. This is why the word "influencer" has become mainstream in marketing and communications in the last 10 years: It works. The best part about these individuals is their vetting and reach. Just like a friend who recommends a good restaurant, you evaluate them on their advice. If they know what they're talking about, you'll keep coming back to learn more.

Who would be most affected by a ban?

Everyone who has a stake in TikTok, be that in time, money or social capital, would be affected by an outright ban. Individual users would be most affected, simply because there are more of them—150 million users in the U.S. alone would lose their network.

For some, this means losing access to social support they can't get anywhere else. Users would lose their archive of stories, which act as memories, timestamps and nostalgic keepsakes, as well as access to comments they've received. Imagine someone going into your photo archive and pressing delete. They'll also lose their bookmarks to other TikToks. This could be inconsequential to some, but to others, these serve as a quick guide, full of life hacks, tips and other forms of useful content you can only find on TikTok.

Influencers would also be significantly affected. Think of them as small-business owners. They generate income on their content, whether that's in direct viewer kickbacks or through big-brand deals. Engagement is the currency that allows them to be compensated. If you lose the app, you lose the engagement. Many influencers are waging their own advocacy campaign with lawmakers right now and encouraging legislatures to think about the small-business owners who might be affected by a ban.

In the scope of for-profit big business, the challenge for brands would be to spot the next place where they could break in and get market share. These decisions are far more analytical than emotional, which sets this group apart. Big business will always find a way.

Have there been any comparable situations in the past?

So many, and some are still missed to this day. RIP Vine, which was the first truly short-form [social media](#) app shut down in 2017 by parent company Twitter.

There's a list of over 100 platforms, many of which came and went without much notice. Others, like Google+, gained some momentum but never really broke into the top-five lineup. I'd even add Twitter to this

list. Not that Twitter was banned, but I think one could argue Elon Musk's "X" of today is loosely based on original Twitter's footprint. The X platform has done a lot of things that made longtime Twitter users fly the coop.

What makes this TikTok ban so interesting is the volume of users and uniqueness of use. Nothing of this size or scale is comparable. Decision-makers and lawmakers are dabbling with something that affects more than 150 million users in the U.S. Most of them are young, soon-to-be voters. My hope is that lawmakers will take a harder look at the economic and social benefits of TikTok and resolve risk-related issues without an outright ban.

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

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