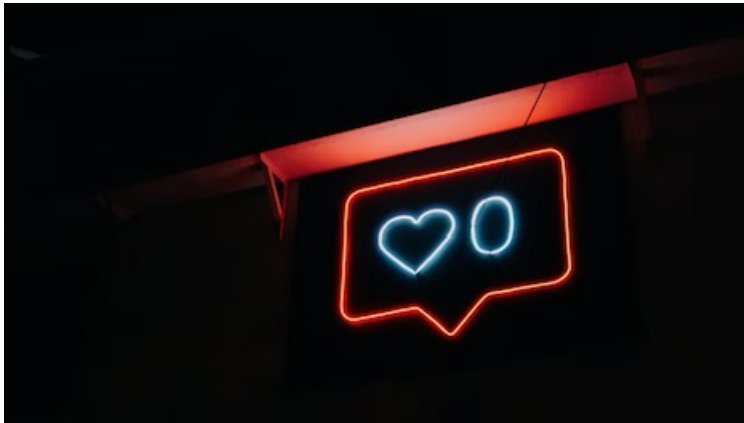


MARKETING

Does Instagram have a TikTok problem?

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To remain relevant and retain its users, Instagram must stay on top of trends, new features and the constantly changing social demands of young users. Image credit: Unsplash

By NORA HOWE

Once considered a disruptive mobile app, social media platform Instagram faces continued hurdles from new platforms and legal controversies.

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Over the course of its 12 year-tenure, Instagram has become saturated by highly-glossed, manufactured content spearheaded by influencers and celebrities. As more social media users crave authenticity and raw entertainment in their content consumption, it begs the question: are they ditching Instagram for the "realness" of platforms like TikTok?

"Consumer habits have shifted since the days of MySpace and Facebook, but now it's not about platforms stealing audiences from one another it's the amount of time consumers spend online," said Jess Phillips, CEO and founder of **The Social Standard**, Los Angeles. "In 2006, MySpace and Facebook were the only platforms around, with MySpace fading into the distance pretty quickly once Facebook offered a better product.

"Fast forward to 2020, the demand for new videos skyrocketed beyond traditional outlets, with TikTok quickly becoming a platform open for everyone, normalizing spending large amounts of time online," she said. "With all age groups hungry for more, users signed up in droves, eager to create and consume."

Rise of TikTok

According to a 2021 [survey](#) by Forrester, Instagram weekly usage by Gen Z, ages 12-17, fell 4 points from 2020 to 2021, while TikTok weekly usage increased by 13 percent.

Gen Z youth members cited entertainment value, short-form variety and positive self-expression as the top reasons why they prefer TikTok over other apps like Instagram and Snapchat, with Facebook having seemingly disappeared from this young cohort's cultural zeitgeist.

"When it comes to TikTok versus Instagram, it boils down to this: Instagram provides a glimpse into an influencer's life while TikTok puts users in the center of it," said Evan Horowitz, CEO and cofounder of **Movers+Shakers**, Los Angeles. "When users scroll through Instagram, they are bombarded with influencers talking at them, rather than talking to them.

"TikTok allows users to feel like they are a part of a creator's narrative, which is less formal and far more open and real," he said. "TikTok is the relatable platform, whereas Instagram is aspirational."

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A TikTok user created her own version of JW Anderson's Color Patchwork cardigan, which spread across the internet after Harry Styles was seen wearing it in early 2020

This realness found on TikTok has proven successful when it comes to consumer behavior. It is all in the sales data.

The TikTok community has effectively convinced brands to "make TikToks, not ads." A recent study found that 56 percent of users and 67 percent of creators feel closer to brands they see on TikTok, particularly when they publish authentic, unpolished content ([see story](#)).

"One of the most powerful parts of the TikTok platform is the variety of content that is generated by its longtail creator base," said Kyle Wong, cofounder of [Pixlee TurnTo](#), Miami. "With TikTok's algorithm, that creator content is highly discoverable regardless of how many followers that creator might have.

For instance, the impact of the [#TikTokMadeMeBuyIt](#) hashtag, which has more than 8.2 billion views, reaches beyond the platform and into sales increases.

In August 2020, TikTok creator Trinidad Sandoval posted her daily skincare routine using Peter Thomas Roth's Instant FIRMx eye cream. Within days of her video going viral, the product was sold out online across major beauty retailers, and the brand estimated that the number of sales in one week following the TikTok video was equivalent to six months.

"While Instagram also has video and is improving its discovery capabilities, TikTok was designed with these features at its core," Mr. Wong said. "As a result, brands are more likely to be discovered on TikTok's For You' page."

According to a [report](#) from neuroanalytics firm [Neuro-Insight](#), TikTok's "For You" page encourages higher levels of relevancy and engagement for brands than sponsored content on other platforms ([see story](#)).

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Gucci nail polish has become a popular item in the #TikTokMadeMeBuyIt trend

"Users love TikTok because the algorithm precisely favors content geared towards their interests, meaning brand influencers can connect with potential customers on an authentic level a win-win situation," The Social Standard's Ms. Phillips said.

"That said, I don't think TikTok is taking users away from Instagram the way Facebook did from MySpace, or Instagram from Facebook," she said. "Instagram realized the upward momentum of TikTok, and has since adjusted itself to prioritize video content over photos."

Where does Instagram stand?

Over the last several years, Facebook Inc, now Meta, has launched various Instagram features to keep up with a number of competing platforms.

This has also put Meta in the crosshairs of legal scrutiny as it faces an antitrust lawsuit from the federal government ([see story](#)). Both Facebook and Instagram have also faced accusations of creating toxic environments, particularly for younger users.

"Overall, the social pie is growing, and because of that, there is room for several apps to be successful, but, that doesn't mean Instagram and every other social platform can relax," Ms. Phillips said. "If these companies don't stay on top of trends, they can and will endure the same fate as MySpace."

In August 2020, the company launched **Instagram Reels** to challenge TikTok's rising popularity, in 2018 it launched its long-form video hub **IGTV** to compete with YouTube and in 2016 it launched Instagram Stories to compete with Snapchat.

"To that end, just because a social platform innovates, or in many cases copies, products from other platforms, doesn't mean it will be successful," she said. "YouTube is struggling to make Shorts work, and Twitter cannot seem to launch a successful product outside of its core competency."

In a similar way, brands and creators have a major responsibility to diversify their content offerings. They must research what features and trends work on which platforms, and design their content accordingly to remain relevant.

"Unlike the past, there has not been a mass linear migration because of what social media is and the role it has in users' lives," Movers+Shakers' Mr. Horowitz said. "We are seeing many Instagram users dial down their overall usage, but they are not fully replacing it with another similar app."

"This new phase of social media is promising for the growth of creators, brands and entertainment but also requires nimbleness to shift with audiences, growing both platform-agnostic and platform-specific strategies."

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