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**THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.**

U.S. EDITION

**CLM** PERSONAL TECHNOLOGY  
**HD** **With TikTok, Even Grown-Ups Can't Stop**  
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**WC** 1,494 words  
**PD** 24 January 2020  
**SN** The Wall Street Journal  
**SC** J  
**PG** B1  
**LA** English  
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**LP**

I probably should've known I had a problem when I recorded myself affixing an AirPods to the heel of my dirty sock with packing tape. Or maybe when I wasted an hour watching people turn Diet Coke bottles into spray cannons using Mentos. Perhaps the Friday night I spent trying to record my dog holding an iPhone was a clue.

I'd like to amend the name of the social-video app known as TikTok. How about TikTok . . . Ya Don't Stop? The kids won't get the '80s hip-hop reference but at least it'll be clear what we're all getting into.

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You likely know some of the following about TikTok: The free, ad-supported app is brimming with dancing and lip-syncing videos. Its parent company's base of operations in Beijing has U.S. lawmakers and regulators on security alert. And the Gen Z sweet spot, 13- to 21-year-olds, can't put it down.

What you might not know? You -- presumably an adult born before Bill Clinton's presidency -- aren't immune to getting hooked. TikTok has made even millennial me a junkie. I'm now actively driving up TikTok's U.S. average use of 23 minutes a day, according to App Annie.

"If I'm done with my work, I'll just be in class with my AirPods in and scrolling through TikTok. The only time we're not on TikTok is during basketball practice," says Trechelle Andino, a 17-year-old who, with her twin sister, posts dances to their 2.6 million TikTok followers. The high school juniors, known on TikTok as the @splashtwinz, even spend their school lunch period dancing in front of their phones.

In a time when Twitter is overrun with politics and bad news, Instagram is about keeping up with the Joneses, and Facebook is, well, Facebook, TikTok is about happy, short videos of random people you didn't even know you wanted to watch, until the algorithms figured you out and sucked you in.

It's time you understood TikTok, if only to grasp how much power these addictive algorithms have over our lives. It's also worth asking how easily a happy-go-lucky TikTok could become a scary-as-hell TikTok, without so much as a tweak to its design.

Everything you know about how social networks work? Throw it down the garbage disposal. Open TikTok and the first thing you see isn't a stream of stuff from people you follow, but a full-screen For You feed of videos. This algorithm-driven, hyper-personalized parade of generally 15-to-60 second, often-musical clips never ends. Swipe up, new video; swipe up, new video; swipe up, new video. TikTok keeps learning and analyzing what you do and keeps the videos it thinks you'll like coming . . . forever.

TikTok doesn't divulge how its algorithms work but various experts explained that the artificial intelligence powering the For You page uses lots of factors to determine what you like to watch, including how long you watch and how fast you swipe away.

Everyone I spoke with pointed to the app's full-screen video design. Instead of giving you lots of thumbnails to choose from, like YouTube or Instagram, TikTok watches you flick away stuff you don't like, gathering helpful negative signals. It also learns what you do want to watch -- even if you don't "heart" anything.

"You can also get a lot more behavioral data when someone watches lots and lots of short videos," says Jason Davis, a professor of entrepreneurship at the Singapore campus of the Insead Business School, who has studied TikTok's parent company, Bytedance Inc.

How quickly TikTok figures you out is bananas. Within minutes, the app knew I'd enjoy videos of millennials making fun of themselves, odd iPhone pranks and dogs. (OK, fine, even serial killers like dogs.)

"As soon as I wake up -- it used to be Instagram or YouTube -- now I head straight to the For You page and I'm just laughing," says Dominic Toliver, a 26-year-old TikTok-famous creator with 8.7 million followers. "I'm just laughing and it's my motivation for the day. I have my ideas and I'm set and ready to go."

Experts assume the 1% rule of the internet applies to TikTok -- that is, 1% of the users create content while the other 99% just lurk. Yet the bar to create videos on TikTok is lower than on other social networks for two reasons:

No. 1: Dead-simple editing tools that let you easily add songs, effects and all sorts of doodads (text, emojis, Snapchat-like filters, etc.) to your short video. Bytedance's AI is also infused here, with the app suggesting songs and hashtags to give your post even more chances of viral success.

No. 2: Memes. A meme is something that's shared, imitated or reinterpreted all around the internet. On TikTok, a meme can be a song or specific type of sound, a dance, a hashtag or a challenge.

Take my favorite meme, built around the Iggy Azalea lyric, "Walk a mile in these Louboutins." Instead of wearing \$1,000 high heels, people began riffing, posting videos of themselves in footwear made from carrots, Legos, oven mitts, you name it.

TikTokers not only put their own creative spin on the meme, they try to one-up each other in creativity (and sometimes in risk-taking). I'll admit, that's what I was doing with the AirPods and the packing tape.

"Memes lower the bar for creation," said Connie Chan, a general partner at venture-capital firm Andreessen Horowitz, which isn't an investor in Bytedance. "They are the secret to get people to start posting and start creating."

Hit "Post" and start obsessively checking the app and monitoring views, likes and shares. The hope? You hit it big and your video appears on other people's For You pages. Because the meme you've jumped on is already trending, your chances of being seen are greater than if you had just come up with your own thing from scratch.

"TikTok is very democratic -- anybody has a chance of going viral," says Lizzy Hale, senior manager of content at TikTok. "That's what's really special to the community, that they don't have to be a superstar to have a video that gets a million views."

My AirPods heels didn't hit that million mark, but within the first hour, I got about 500 views -- more than on any other TikTok video I'd posted. And whenever I'd open the app, I'd see new red alerts indicating that more people had watched or liked my video. 1,000 . . . 1,500 . . . 2,000 . . . it was a rush.

The entire TikTok system is designed to rinse and repeat the whole cycle, over and over. Once you've produced and posted your meme, TikTok can then begin to surface other memes and trends in your For You feed that its algorithms predict you'd join in on too, Prof. Davis says.

"Post consistently to keep growing": That's advice from the company's "How to TikTok" one-pager, distributed to popular creators.

But how consistently? Weekly? Daily? Every hour on the hour? It takes no time for TikTok to turn you into an attention-sapped, silly-video-seeking zombie, controlled by algorithms that fuel desire for pleasure and fame. I've started telling friends not to download the app unless they really want to get hooked.

"TikTok is a fun home and what we call the last sunny spot of the internet," Ms. Hale said. "It's a place for real people and real content. This is a place you can be yourself and express yourself authentically."

I really have felt that, but I can't help also feeling clouds are on the horizon. Political content has already started to flood the app and shape the algorithms -- suggesting #trump2020 hashtags, for instance, based on what you're posting. TikTok memes about World War 3 went viral after the Iran airstrikes. Meanwhile, there are increasing reports of the algorithm sending sexualized videos to male users en masse.

A TikTok spokeswoman says users "can post videos on whatever is interesting and expressive to them, aside from things like hate speech or other violations of our Community Guidelines." Sure, and the same goes for every other platform that's already been abused.

As for me, I'm working on weaning myself off. I've set TikTok's Screen Time Management feature to lock me out after 40 minutes. Except there's this meme I just saw where you put candy, like M&Ms, on a treadmill and catch it in your mouth . . .

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