

4. TikTok

4.1 On the History of Short-Form Video Platforms

TikTok is a digital platform that enables users to upload and share short-form videos. Similar platforms, which to some extent facilitated the advent of TikTok's considerable success, have been in existence since the first half of the 2010s. While each platform exhibits distinctive characteristics, there are a number of common features that are inherent to short-form video platforms in general. It is evident that the format of the short-form video is a central aspect of all platforms of this nature, although the specifications regarding the duration of the videos vary considerably. For instance, the discontinued platform Vine hosted videos with a maximum duration of six seconds (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 20). Another common characteristic of short-form video platforms is the "endless scroll feature" (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 21). This feature means that each user is presented with a bespoke selection of videos, algorithmically curated by the platform. Should the user find the video unappealing, they can simply swipe it away, prompting the immediate display of another video. On the platform TikTok, this is referred to as the *For You page*. This feature is typically the primary means by which users discover new content on short-form video platforms (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 21). Furthermore, short-form video platforms are typically low-threshold, facilitating the creation, editing, and posting of videos for users with varying levels of expertise. These processes are integrated into video production features, whereas YouTube videos are produced and then uploaded without the assistance of features offered by the relevant platform (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 22). This option is also available on short-form video platforms such as TikTok, but users are free to choose. Furthermore, content on short-form video platforms is generally easily replicated, as the interfaces offer functions

that allow, for example, users to use other users' videos as the basis for their own (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 23).

TikTok's predecessors include the short-form video platforms Vine, Snapchat, Flipagram, Musical.ly, and Douyin (for a chronological overview of the development of short-form video platforms, see Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 27). The first internationally successful short-form video platform was Vine, which was acquired by Twitter (now X) in 2012 and officially launched a year later. The videos, which had a maximum duration of six seconds, were presented to users in the form of a feed, similar to the one that remains a fundamental aspect of X's current functionality. In the third year following its launch, Vine had over 200 million active users. However, in 2016, Twitter managers made the decision to discontinue the platform (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 34). The first half of the 2010s also saw the development of a phenomenon known as *stories*, which is not congruent with the short-form video format, but which helped shape the trend toward short media forms or *microformats* (Moermann et al. 2021). Stories are defined by their ephemeral nature, as they are removed from platforms after a designated period of time and can only be accessed once by individual users. The concept of the story was first introduced on the social media platform Snapchat in 2013. Snapchat is, in essence, a messaging platform. However, users were permitted to send one another what are known as *snaps*, which are photos or videos of up to ten seconds in length that are automatically deleted immediately after being viewed by the recipient. In 2016, Instagram introduced a feature called *stories*, which are automatically deleted after 24 hours. This feature has been a core aspect of the platform for several years (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström, 2022, 35–37). A comparable feature has been offered by the platform Flipagram since 2013. It permits the creation of image slideshows of up to 30 seconds, with the option of adding music (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 38).

Musical.ly represents the principal predecessor of TikTok, and it possesses certain features that remain integral to the functionality of TikTok in the present day. Musical.ly was first launched in August 2014, following the completion of its development in China. From its inception, the stated objective was to establish Musical.ly as a successful platform in the U.S. market; the platform subsequently became popular in Europe as well. Musical.ly was originally conceived as a platform for sharing educational content. However, as this project was not successful, the focus soon shifted to music creation (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 40–42). It would be erroneous to assume that Musical.ly is the sole short-form video platform developed by Chinese companies.

Similar platforms have been highly popular in China since the early 2010s and serve as a prime example of Chinese web services that are specifically designed for international markets. For example, the company Kuaishou was established in 2011 and developed the short-form video platform of the same name, which remains highly popular to this day (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 25). As a consequence of the political climate in China, an autonomous platform ecosystem has emerged. International web services frequently face rigorous censorship by the Chinese government, which has prompted Chinese companies to develop their own platforms based on Western models and adapt them to the country's specific political circumstances (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 24).

The Chinese company ByteDance was responsible for the development of both TikTok and its sister platform, Douyin. Douyin was developed for the Chinese market, and TikTok is its international counterpart. With regard to functionality, the two platforms exhibit at most incremental differences (Kaye, Chen, and Zeng 2021). It is notable that Douyin was launched in 2016 – relatively late, given the developments in the Chinese short-form video platform market described above. In its inaugural year, the platform already had approximately 100 million users (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 48). In November 2017, Musical.ly was acquired by ByteDance and initially continued to operate under this name, followed by the launch of TikTok a few months later (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 43). Although no official figures are available, it is estimated that ByteDance invested between \$800 million and \$1 billion in Musical.ly (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 50). In retrospect, this acquisition can be seen as a strategic move that was well-considered and executed with a high degree of probability of success. For one thing, ByteDance had the necessary technologies to successfully develop and operate short-form video platforms, especially the algorithmically moderated video feed that was already a core feature of Douyin. In addition, the Chinese company now owned Musical.ly, a platform that had already achieved international success and was tailored to the interests of young users in the Western market (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 50). Musical.ly and TikTok were finally merged in 2018, continuing to operate under the name TikTok (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 44). The remarkable international success of Musical.ly and TikTok subsequently prompted other Chinese companies to develop short-form video platforms for markets outside of China. For instance, Transsnet created the platform Vskit for users in various African countries, while Kwai (based on the

platform Kuaishou) was developed for the Brazilian market (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 26).

4.2 TikTok: Rise and Target Group

On a global scale, TikTok is one of the most successful and fastest-growing digital platforms of last few years. By 2020, two years after its official launch and merger with Musical.ly, the platform had already amassed 700 million active users outside of China. The number of monthly downloads reached its highest point during the initial global lockdowns that were implemented in response to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus. Over 100 million monthly downloads were recorded, and the TikTok app was downloaded over 300 million times in the first quarter of 2020. By February 2021, the total number of downloads since its launch had already exceeded 2.5 billion (Bhandari and Bimo 2022, 1; Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 8).

As asserted by prominent developers and staff at ByteDance, TikTok and Musical.ly were designed with a predominantly youthful demographic in mind (Zeng, Abidin, and Schäfer 2021, 3162). In a public announcement, Alex Zhu, the founder of Musical.ly, stated that he had observed the online activities of younger consumers and discerned that their virtual pursuits were largely centered around music, dance, and online gaming. Social interaction with their peers was also of paramount importance. In order to address these interests and the need for social interaction, platform features were developed that allowed for low-threshold exchange while focusing on music-related content (Savic 2021, 3184). At the time of its inception, TikTok was predominantly utilized by a younger demographic. In 2020, for instance, 40% of TikTok users were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four, while in the U.S. over 30% of the nearly fifty million daily users were fourteen or younger. One year later, the platform was being utilized on a daily basis by approximately 60% of the U.S. population between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. However, the target group became significantly more diverse during the global lockdowns (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström 2022, 171; Zeng and Kaye 2022, 80). The growth in the number of users demonstrates that TikTok experienced a notable surge in popularity, particularly during the first global lockdowns. During this period, the platform positioned itself as a source of entertainment and learning during challenging times of social isolation (Zeng, Abidin, and Schäfer 2021, 3163). Additionally, research findings indicate that the platform was utilized by