

September 2, 2022 13 minute read

The “je ne sais quoi” of TikTok

How a misunderstood platform has completely taken over the world.

TikTok has taken over the world. Every other social media has a shallow copy of it that sucks. I stopped using most [traditional social media about 5 years ago](#). I was happy without it — I didn't feel like anything was missing from my life. If I stopped using TikTok, I would miss it. TikTok is different from everything that has come before it in many ways that are difficult to articulate. In French this concept is called “je ne sais quoi.” I also believe it's the future of social media. As in, every subsequent successful social media product will incorporate some aspect of TikTok's innovations. The problem is, I don't think a lot of people understand what those innovations actually are. I'm a big fan of TikTok, so I thought I'd try to lay it out in this post.

Recently this [great article](#) did a deep dive with metrics and data to try to quantify exactly *why* TikTok is better. This post is not that. It's unapologetically anecdotal. Additionally, I'm aware that TikTok's popularity has geo-political implications which are the subject of intense debate. This post doesn't deal with that at all— it's purely about TikTok as a product and platform.

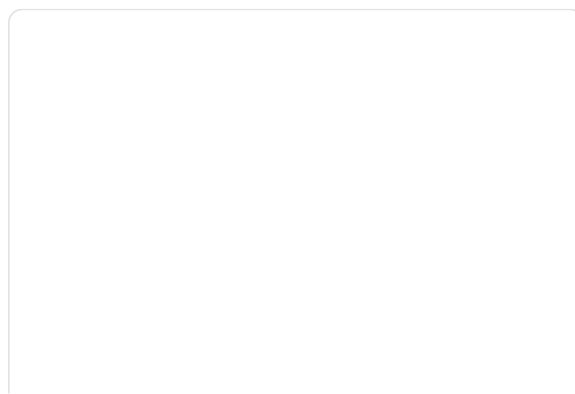
From MySpace onward, the paradigm of social media has always been about telling. Telling the platform—and everybody else—*who you are*. You tell it your gender, your date of birth, your interests, your friends, your thoughts about this or that subject. You have this persona you craft and present to the world. A quick look over my [LinkedIn](#) profile shows this in action. I'm presenting myself as

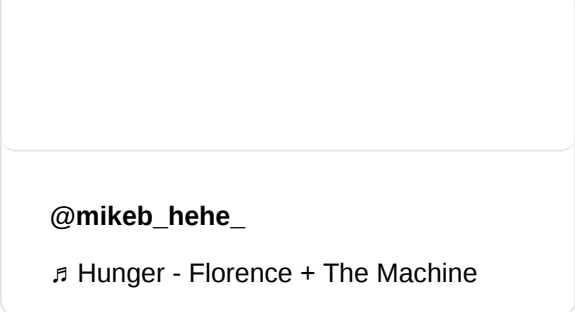
a competent and experienced professional. I have even taken little quizzes to show proficiency in this or that skill. This is probably overkill. My work history is enough to establish my bona fides. But the reason it's so fleshed out is that I am indulging in this ritual — this act of creating and heightening a persona. If you're my age, you've been doing it in some form or another on social media since you were a teenager or even younger.

The problem with these personas is—it's not *quite* actually you. The act of describing yourself causes distortion. It's who you *think* you are, or it's how you wish people saw you. Maybe it actually is you—on your best day. This has been widely noted and decried. The compare and despair effect of comparing everybody's manicured outside to your inside. At it's worst, a “who has the best life” contest. Attention and validation (both valid human needs) is a scarce resource that must be scraped together with performative posts that start with phrases like “I am humbled to announce...”

That's just for personal social media. The situation is even worse if you're trying to make art and reach people, like with writing, music, or live streaming. The winners take all the attention. You will find people commenting on popular music videos begging anybody to try out their content.

When I first tried TikTok probably some time in 2018 or 2019, it didn't ask me for *anything*. Not even my name. It certainly didn't ask me to construct a persona the way other social media does. That appealed to me, but the content it showed me was also different from anything I'd seen before. Of course there were comedy sketches and traditional content like you might have seen on YouTube or Vine. But when TikTok is discussed, people focus on “the algorithm” and how it shows you content that is specifically interesting to you. What they miss is that TikTok enables types of content that simply *cannot* exist on other platforms.





@mikeb_hehe_

🎵 Hunger - Florence + The Machine

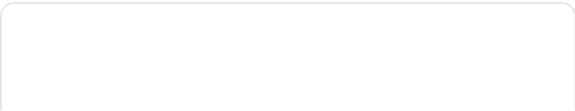
One day, this video came across my feed. A quick swipe over to his account shows that's all he posts- just videos of him dancing his heart out to eclectic pop music. There's no grand value proposition like you might see on a short form Instagram video about how to make cute popsicles for summer. At the end he didn't approach the camera and say "Hey if you liked that, be sure to like and subscribe and hit that notification bell." It's just someone dancing their heart out and enjoying themselves.

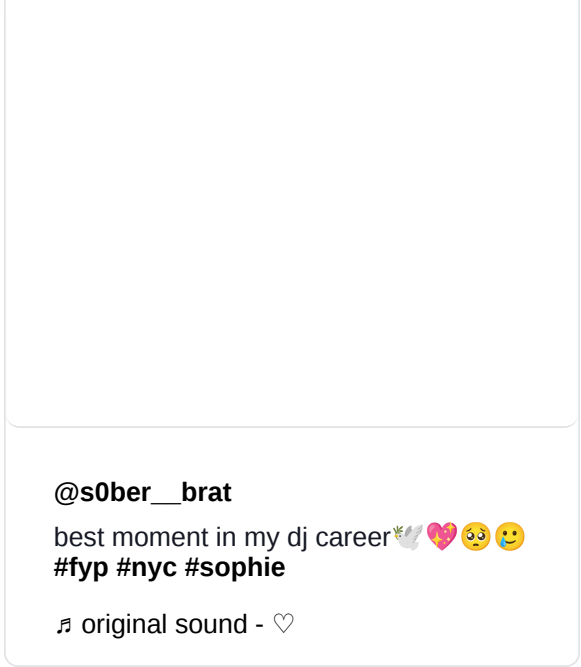
That's it. You can take it or leave it. When I watch this video, it makes me feel happy. I enjoy seeing someone give themselves over to music so passionately. I think his song choices are great and he publishes a Spotify playlist that has led me to discover some of my new favorite music. Sometimes he dances outside, sometimes he dances in his kitchen. I don't know anything else about him, and don't really need to.

His TikTok account has over 25,000 followers. He has a fanbase for his videos and clearly gets his needs as a human being (attention, validation, connection) met by posting those videos.

It's almost impossible for me to imagine someone posting the same content on YouTube or Instagram and being successful without an established following. They'd be regarded as an oddity/insane for posting videos of themselves dancing to 10-20 views per video.

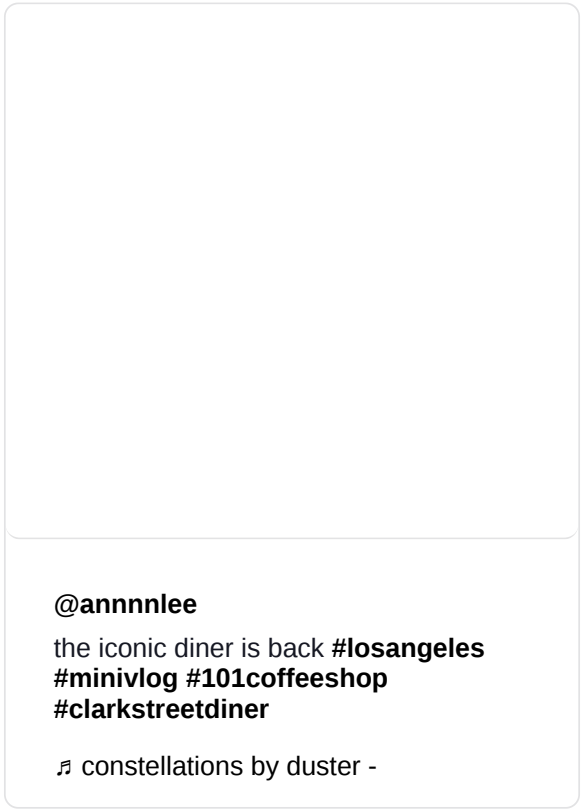
This is my favorite kind of TikTok. I don't have a well defined categorization system, but this falls under what I would term "impressionistic" - It's a window into someone else's experience and emotions. Almost like a slice of life. It connects you to another human being in a way that Facebook always claimed to. Here's another one of my favorites.





Just a moment posted by a D.J. of a set he was playing, but when the drop hits I can *feel* the pure expression of joy, condensed into a moment in time.

Other impressionistic style videos can capture the essence of a place, or an intimate moment.



@pineacre

walk with me

🎵 original sound - Kyle Rothwell

@verdeflowerco

He is the ultimate rascal, but boy does he deserve the world 🥹🥹🥹


**#borzoisoftiktok #flowerfarmerflorist
#flowerfarmersdog #longdog #borzoi
#wolfhound**

🎵 original sound - Roisin

Not every video has to be the star of the show, you can have these utility players making up elements of your “For You” page.

Even when not impressionistic, there’s space for introspective or “negative” content that explores the full spectrum of what it’s like to... be a person. It feels authentic. Not created to elicit sympathy, rather, commiseration.

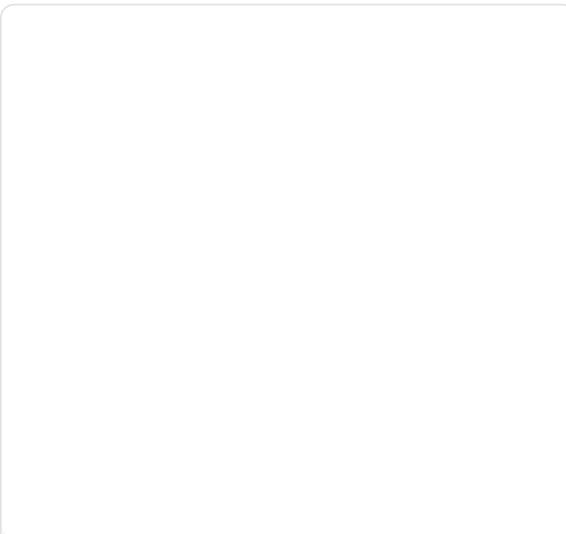
Like this person expressing how they feel after moving to another country.



@kalie_ho
How I have been feeling lately
#movingboard #seoulife

♪ That must be so confusing for a little

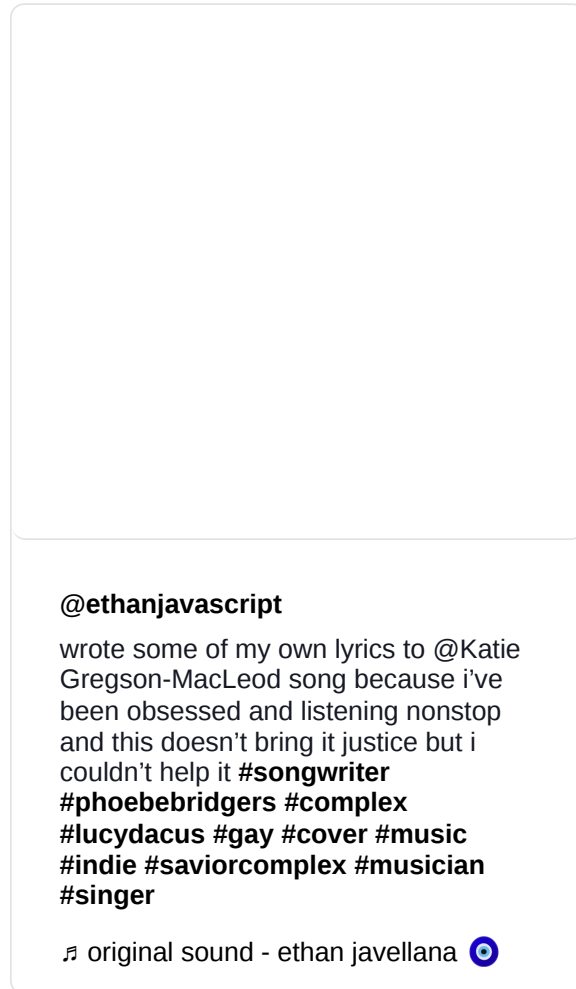
Or a man being very candid about his struggle to climb the socioeconomic ladder, and his self doubts.



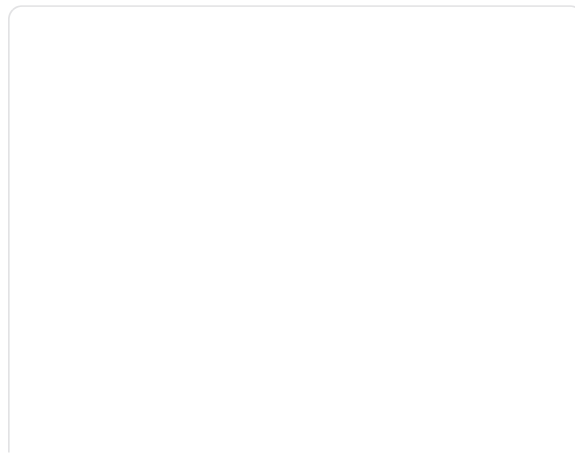
@roger311
Experience of buying an apartment in
China **#condo #apartment #house**
#china

♪ original sound - Roger Wu

Collaboration is so easy. A user can write a raw, vulnerable verse to someone else's song and achieve the emotional connection that music can facilitate with hundreds of thousands of people. Without even showing their face or name. To me, this is *incredible*. Especially when you consider that the closest other platforms get to this is spammy "Plz check out my music 🙏" comments on a Drake music video.



Or, people can get together and mock some highly polished performative content. The ability to stitch and layer new videos on top of each other is incredibly unique.



@grahamistearingup

longest one? @TomWalker #duet
#emo #midwestemo
#americanfootball #musictok
#SongOfTheSummer

🎵 original sound - Graham

For all of the cynicism I've seen about social media over the last 7 years, TikTok has felt like the opposite. A scroll through a Facebook or Instagram feed can leave one feeling less than. TikTok has never made me feel that way. It's made me feel seen and understood by complete strangers. It's helped me understand myself and other people better. It made me feel a lot less alone during the pandemic.

That's the point I am trying to get at with this post. It's very tough to explain, especially to "Product Managers" focused on KPIs who think of TikTok as "short videos." It's not just a format change or a tab you can add to your app's navigation. It's an unambiguously positive change in social media, on pretty much every front. To try to get it down to a bulleted list:

- Organic audience acquisition without need for self promotion.

- Types of content that can flourish is much broader.

- Incredible collaboration tools, leading to mixing and remixing art on the platform. The only other example of this I can think of this on other social platforms is textual. Quoting someone's tweet and commenting on it and the like.

- Manages to maintain a platform-level "zeitgeist" of sorts, similar to Twitter, while also giving users highly customized experiences. It does this without the need for trending topics or curated hashtags, it's all in the algorithm.

- Fosters empathy instead of sowing division. Much less emphasis on "culture war" and politics.

That's the other thing I wanted to address in this post. While TikTok is unique and innovative, it is not all encompassing. It cannot take over the role that Facebook plays. Especially when it comes to things like Groups or Marketplace. I feel like ever since

MySpace, the narrative in social media has been “the next one will pop up, then yours will die.”

But I think the space has matured. Facebook should take an approach of pivoting to becoming the “Oracle” of social media. A legacy player that’s always going to be there and play to it’s strengths. It has a successful and profitable portfolio of companies with entrenched userbases. Are these rushes to copy surface level features from new social media apps even successful? Because they’re definitely embarrassing. Recently Instagram users revolted because the platform was morphing to focus too heavily on video. Why not just focus on what makes Instagram special and try to keep innovating on that? Or better yet, look at how TikTok is *actually* different and try to apply those concepts to your own product.

Anyways, this is my attempt to narrow down what I find so compelling about TikTok. To effable the ineffable. I hope I was able to write something true. I believe that thinking about technology in a broader way like this is really important. I am going to try to do it more often.

Hey — My name is Daniel Immke. I’m a designer & developer who travels the world.

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