

TikTok Influencers: How age affects popularity

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Abstract. TikTok has become one of the most popular social media apps today, its user-generative nature allows anyone to upload videos onto the platform with the potential to become famous. This gives rise to TikTok influencers, and content creators with a large number of followers on TikTok. This paper offers a qualitative study on how the age of TikTok influencers affects their popularity through a literature review and TikTok content analysis. The research result reveals that younger TikTok influencers are more popular than older TikTok influencers. This difference in popularity is a result of the different nature of their video content and ways of presentation. Compared to older influencers, younger influencers tend to have greater content diversity, better technological skills to generate videos with more captivating effects and presentation style, and higher compatibility with TikTok's user demographics. Furthermore, due to the generation gap between young and old people, the predominately young social media users tend to discriminate against older content creators on the platform, causing them to have more difficulties in gaining popularity.

1. Introduction

TikTok is a short video-sharing app that has gained soaring popularity in recent years. According to a study by Iqbal, TikTok's global impact is extremely far-reaching as it has close to 1 billion active users monthly [1]. The type of content on TikTok, just like other social media platforms, is undoubtedly diverse. Its user-generative nature enables everyone to be the director of their content and to share it with people from all over the world. Because of how accessible and easy it is to upload videos on TikTok, many people dedicated themselves to becoming TikTok influencers.

TikTok influencers are an indispensable part of the TikTok ecosystem. They ensure the liveliness of the community and make TikTok a platform where e-commerce businesses thrive. They generate huge profits every day for TikTok, and other companies that leverage TikTok for marketing, as well as themselves. Thus, there has been rising scholarly interest in TikTok influencers lately. While most scholarly works have focused on TikTok influencers as a new marketing strategy, very few research have explored the age of TikTok influencers in relation to their popularity.

From 19-year-old most viral TikToker Charli D'amelio to 92-year-old "granfluencer" Grandma Droniak, there are numerous examples of successful TikTok stars from a range of ages. Are younger TikTok influencers more popular than older TikTok content creators? If so, what are some of the causes behind this phenomenon? What social implication does this observation have?

To address these questions and the lack of study on how the age of TikTok influencers affects their

popularity, it would be worthwhile to conduct research comparing the difference in levels of popularity between younger TikTok influencers and older TikTok influencers. In this research, younger TikTok influencers are defined as having an age of 18 to 30 and older TikTok influencers as those 50 and above. This paper will examine factors that contributed to the differences in popularity level between young TikToker and senior TikToker by deeply analyzing their content types and form of presentation. The research method used would include both a literature review and qualitative social media analysis. Specific TikTok videos that represent the younger influencers and those that are created by older influencers would be compared and contrasted based on the type and form of these chosen content, and detailed interpretation would be provided. Finally, a study like this would yield valuable social implications in areas such as popular culture, digital engagement, and mental wellness. It further reveals the generational divide in digital engagement and leads to the proposal of better ways to create an inclusive digital space for people of all ages.

2. Understanding TikTok

Before diving into the analysis of influencer content, the paper will first give an introduction to TikTok. TikTok is a short-video app first launched by the Chinese company ByteDance, which was also known to be the developer of Musical.ly, a similar app that merged with TikTok after it was released [2]. Though TikTok is just one of the many social media apps, as a new platform, it differs drastically from its predecessors such as Instagram,

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YouTube, and so on. Some of its unique features and characteristics including the in-app recording and editing, short video length, automatic scrolling, and video re-creation made content creation ever so easy, inspiring numerous innovations and digital trends. TikTok's typical 15-second video feature and equal promotion on the For You Page, give anyone the opportunity to be liked by millions of strangers all over the world, a very attractive idea to young people who are playful and looking for new excitement [3]. According to data from Marketing Charts, young users aged from 16 to 24 take up the biggest portion of TikTok user demographics in the United States [4]. Since TikTok is an app that is entirely made up of user-generated content, its user demographics indicate that the platform is skewed towards younger audiences. Not only is most of the content created for younger netizens but also created by younger influencers. This is obvious when people identify the most popular TikTok influencers and their age.

As of 2023, the most popular TikTok influencer is Charli D'amelio, who has nearly 150 million followers on the platform. This 19-year-old girl rose to fame on TikTok by dancing to trending songs. The second famous TikToker is 25-year-old Bella Poarch with over 90 million followers and whose lip-syncing videos became the most liked video ever on TikTok. However, some of the most famous senior influencers such as Grandma Dronaik only has 11 million followers, which is about ten times less than that of Charli D'amelio. The fact that all the top TikTok stars are relatively young seems to demonstrate that the lower the age of the TikTok influencer, the more popular they are likely to be. To further prove this hypothesis, the paper will examine specific TikTok videos from young and old influencers to determine whether that is true and to explore the reasons behind such a result.

3. Popular young TikTok influencers

3.1 Video content genre and message conveyed

Just like its predecessor Musical.ly and as its brand name indicates, one of the most popular genres on TikTok is dancing. Usually, someone would first upload an original dance to a trending song, and then a lot of TikTok users would try to learn the choreography and post their own covers on the platform. Though called dancing, these dance videos mostly only involve the movement of the upper body with a lot of hand and arm movements, and the dancer could just remain in one place to complete the entire choreography [5]. Due to these seemingly easier dancing rubrics and the shorter length of these dances, it is easy for anyone to quickly grasp the dance within a few minutes. Thus, it became popular among young people, who could post a dance cover and feel good about themselves just by sparing a few minutes.

The currently most popular TikTok star Charli D'amelio started her TikTok career by posting viral dance videos. While Charlie has branched into posting other types of TikTok videos as a celebrity now, her most popular videos are still her dance videos back in 2020 during her earlier stage of TikTok exploration. Charlie is an excellent dancer, but she always presents herself as someone who is real and goofy so her followers can relate to her well [6]. In her dance videos, she mostly appears solo but sometimes brings in her friends and family members to dance with her. She often wears athleisure clothes such as yoga pants, crop-tops, hoodies, and shorts. Her bright smile, effusive expressions, clean make-up, and fit body emanate confidence and energy. Charlie's uplifting dance, casual outfits, and unrestrained expressions portray her as a popular yet relatable teenage girl whom everyone wants to be friends with. TikTok content creators like Charlie can gain so much following on the app because she made the majority of TikTok users, teenagers, and young adults, aspire to be as cool as her.

Besides dancing, another trending content that is frequently adopted by young TikTok influencers is the POV, or point of view videos. The hashtag POV has over 980 billion videos under it, proving its popularity. The POV videos in general feature the content creator re-enacting a scene by pretending to be someone else. The audience is invited to feel like they are present and witness the scenario that is depicted in the video. TikToker Juliettegeweg is famous for her POV videos. She frequently embodies the "pick me girl", which is an internet slang for young girls who act in a certain way for others' attention and especially with the goal of impressing boys. In her video "POV the pick me girls eat lunch with the boys," she pretends to be a girl who is superficially nice to her female friends but begs for attention when she is around men. She speaks in a sharp high-pitched voice, keeps applying makeup, and insults her girlfriends for their appearance. As the "boys" come over, she greets them with a big smile, pulls one side of her clothes off the shoulder, and pretends that she only eats healthy food. Her vivid acting skills along with her realistic high school campus background attracted thousands of people to her comment area. Many echoed her accurate portrayal of the "pick me girl" and expressed how they could relate to this simulation.

POV creators like Juliettegeweg are extremely successful at making viewers feel that these incidents occurred in their lives even though they might not have experienced this in reality [7]. The POV content is a brilliant idea that has infinite potential since there are so many similar experiences that people share in their daily lives. These common experiences give rise to all kinds of POVs scenarios for young people to criticize and make fun of things that happen in life. It is again, the realness and relatability of these POV videos that draw people in and make them stay. The POV videos on the social media platform TikTok create a hyperreality space for teenagers and young adults to complain about incidents in life and release social pressure without any real-world consequences.

3.2 Video type and form of presentation

Viral TikTok videos among younger influencers take on various forms. Cervi's study introduced that the two main forms of TikTok videos are duets and challenges [5]. People make duet videos when they either perform the same action as the original video or film their reaction to the original piece, adopting a split-screen effect by having their video side-by-side to the original piece. This presentation enables viewers to see both the original video and the influencer's reaction, giving them a chance to see if their favorite influencer has the same opinion on the trending TikTok as them or not. It is also entertaining to see the duet person's exaggerated reactions and be amused by their scathing remarks. Besides, creative content creators also make duets where they perform the same action as the original video but turn it into something new. For instance, yandani.sing is a young boy whose most popular videos are him singing in duets with a singer of the original song cover. The boy would sing in harmony with the original singer and turn the song cover into something even more beautiful than the initial cover.

TikTok challenges is another form of video where young people join in the trend to film their own dance covers or physical challenges. To join a dance challenge, the dancer just needs to record a video using the trending dance soundtrack and the video will be collected into the archive of that sound. Dance challenges are often filmed with a focus on the upper body in a mundane location such as the bedroom [6]. The informal settings of the filming environment invite people to create content no matter where they are, encouraging video quantity and diversity. Besides dance challenges, physical challenges are also always trending. To be specific, the hashtag couples challenge is trending now. Many people hashtag the topic of couples' challenges to carry out a series of physical movements with their partner. Based on a trending couple challenge video, people would follow the same movement instruction by filming their practices, the moments of success, and failure.

4. Viral senior TikTok influencers

4.1 Video content and message conveyed

Though elderly people are often believed to be less tech-savvy than younger people, some of them managed to navigate social media proficiently and gained a large number of following on TikTok. Recently, the TikTok "granfluencers," which refers to older content creators, have caught public attention [8]. These grandparent influencers tend to post content that is educational, practical, and fun. 93 years old Grandma Droniak is a TikTok influencer with 11 million followers. She frequently posts videos following the latest TikTok trends such as GRWM, get ready with me, showing her putting on make-up, picking an outfit, and doing fun activities. She also posts videos of her complaining about her relationships such as her video for her ex-boyfriend. When Grandma Droniak talks, she always

sounds carefree and confident. She would also use a lot of internet slang such as "slay" and "toxic" as well as curse words. Despite people usually associating elderly people with being frail, conservative, and technologically challenged, Grandma Dronaik exhibits none of those characteristics. Her grasp of popular culture, careless attitude, and good taste in fashion drew many viewers to her channel. Many young people enjoyed her videos and support her sassy demeanor because they feel connected to her as if she is not an elderly person but a friend of their age.

Similar to Grandama Dronaik, there are other older TikTokers who made an effort to present themselves in a positive light to combat age stereotypes [9]. One of them is Antisue. 62-year-old Antisue is a singer, and her page is filled with song covers. Nevertheless, what makes Antisue stand out from thousands of other TikTok singers is that she covers the latest Kpop songs. From Black Pink's *Pretty Savage* to Wayv's *Love Talk*, Anitsue sings these songs passionately wearing sexy leopard print dresses. Though Kpop music is popular nowadays, they are not mainstream music in the West. It is hard to associate Kpop song covers with 60-year-old white women like Antisue, who would be expected to have limited knowledge and appreciation for Korean popular music. However, Antisue's enthusiastic song covers and her youthful presence surprised many young people and incentivized them to follow her account. Additionally, Antisue not only energetically embraces popular Gen-Z culture, but also dresses herself confidently, challenging the aging stereotypes such as being feeble and orthodox.

Moreover, Grandadjoe is a grandpa TikToker who is famous for his videos on life hacks. In one of his videos, he teaches young people how to make tasty sandwiches in the way he used to make them during food rationing and wartime. Another video of his is a cooking tutorial on homemade fries and pan-fried meals. These videos are highly practical and fascinating as they introduce young people to things that don't exist now but are common back in the day. By watching these videos, young people could gain more understanding of older people and appreciate their way of living.

4.2 Video type and form of presentation

In terms of video presentation form, older TikTok influencers generally adopt basic TikTok features such as incorporating title captions, audio, songs, and replying to the comment effect. For instance, Anitsue often uses the title caption to inform the viewers about the songs that she will be performing in her video so that people could be better informed. Grandma Dronaik's beloved TikTok feature is lip-syncing. Lip-syncing is a distinctive feature on TikTok that pairs a video with a soundtrack, which allows users to re-create the original video or sound [2]. In one of Grandma Dronaik's video, she lip-synced the audio "the bitch is back" while changing her clothes to a fancy blouse to surprise her followers with a new upload. She also leverages the reply to comments feature to engage with her viewers

and to create new content. To be specific, she quoted one previous comment asking her if she has a boyfriend by clarifying humorously that she doesn't have one and doesn't want one.

5. Young and old TikTok influencers' popularity comparison

5.1 Video content

The diversity of content is a key factor that contributed to the success of younger TikTok influencers. Though younger TikTok influencers are known for their entertaining and prank-filled videos, they also create videos on more serious topics related to social issues [1]. From dance challenges to educational and activist videos, young people offered the viewers numerous options to engage with. Their videos are more aesthetic and energetic, often featuring pretty girls and boys and their youthful bodies. On the other hand, senior influencers' videos are more monotonous. Due to their limited physical mobility and exposure to popular culture, their videos tend to focus on mundane topics such as family, age, and advice. Their videos also tend to be more practical. Common videos are advice on relationships and cooking. These types of videos might require viewers to make more effort to watch than the fun and call-to-action videos created by younger influencers.

5.2 Presentation style

Furthermore, younger TikTok influencers' video content are more popular because they tend to have the skills to better navigate TikTok features to create videos in a variety of forms. To elaborate, young influencers are often more tech-savvy, so they are able to adopt various TikTok effects and features that older influencers find difficult to use. For example, younger influencers frequently use TikTok features such as duets, green-screen, filters, AI voices, whereas older TikTok content creators tend to only adopt the most simple and basic features such as captions in video and their own voices. The cool effects that young influencers use make their videos more eye-catching and entertaining to watch. Besides, they are better at forming relationships with other TikTok creators of their age on the platform and creating all kinds of collaboration videos to further attract fans to their pages.

5.3 Negative social stereotypes

Finally, negative social stereotypes also caused senior influencers' videos to be less popular than young TikTokers' videos. One example of discrimination against older people is the "OK, Boomer" trend on TikTok. It is a slogan used by Millennials content creators to complain and make fun of Baby Boomers, people who were born between the end of the 1940s to the mid-1960s. The "OK, Boomer" video usually features a scenario where a Millennial would be rude to

their parents or older relatives when these adults try to discipline them by responding "OK, Boomer" to irritate them. This trend was supported by many young people on TikTok because they are annoyed by the generational gap between them and older people, who are often out of touch with modernity and maintain conservative beliefs [10]. The hashtag "Ok Boomer" has over 4 billion views, and all the videos exhibit a high level of spite and ridicule targeting not only the baby boomers but elderly people in general. The trend was also echoed by Millennials who sided with Gen-Z users to advocate for the disapproval of Baby Boomers [11]. Such a phenomenon reveals how negatively older people are affected by ageism on this platform. Because of the malice and judgement that young people have towards older people, it is rather difficult for senior influencers to be accepted and supported on TikTok, which directly affects their level of popularity.

6. Conclusion

Both the research data and TikTok content comparison above prove that younger influencers are more popular on the platform than older influencers due to differences in their content and ways of presentation as well as their compatibility with TikTok's user demographics. Despite being less popular in general, many older TikTok influencers demonstrated a strong desire to combat ageism stereotypes by creating numerous entertaining videos, engaging with younger audiences, and learning the internet culture and latest technologies on TikTok. Some senior influencers managed to gain millions of followers by uploading engrossing content in unique ways of presentation. They have especially won the hearts of many younger audiences, who were moved by their effort to embrace popular culture and progressive ideas. TikTok as a creative digital platform has the potential to bridge the generational gap between young people and older people, dissolving misunderstanding and encouraging communication. If younger influencers could collaborate with older influencers in content creation on TikTok, they could spread positivity on aging to the larger society, improving communication and understanding between people of different ages.

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