

## **TikTok: A New Source of Labor**

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TikTok is a social media platform that was released in Fall of 2016. This app originated in China under the name Musical.ly until the two merged in 2017 and started to become increasingly popular. An article published by Savic, M. states, "TikTok, formerly known as Musical.ly, rose to prominence as a lip-syncing platform that allowed users to create videos singing over existing popular songs. After its acquisition by Chinese tech giant Byte Dance, in 2017, TikTok cemented its position as a global short-video leader by embedding platform features that enable users to emulate, imitate, replicate, and reuse popular trending videos" (Savic). In 2018 this newly found phenomenon launched worldwide and since then their popularity has continued to skyrocket. TikTok to many is just another social media platform used to occupy time with videos that tend to be entertaining, informative, or in most cases the newest dance trend. However, TikTok is also becoming a new kind of labor. People who use TikTok as their job are becoming more and more "normal" because the typical nine-to-five is uninteresting to today's generation.

When Covid-19 struck the nation, human interaction took a large hit, even bigger than it already has from new technologies. People were restricted from leaving the house, spreading out six inches from someone was demanded, and masks restricted full faces from being shown. Talking to people the way it used to be understood as "normal", came to be non-existent. A new phenomenon, not amazingly popular yet, was just being discovered by many and then hit a breakthrough during the pandemic. TikTok's were originally a singular video that could only be fifteen seconds long. As the app has developed, TikToks may now be up to three minutes long. However, the original fifteen second clip remains the most popular length seen across the app. Fast TikToks have become very powerful and the short, direct clips have many capabilities. The growth of this app has been exponential. In the beginning, the most popular social media influencer on TikTok was Loren Gray who had about 35 million followers accumulated since the start of her newfound fame through TikTok. After a year with a huge spike in popularity, multiple people soared past her in follower count and the current most popular account on

TikTok is Charli D'Amelio. Charli has 135 million followers and is 7.8K followers ahead of the account that is placed second. TikTok is very fond of the D'Amelio family as Charli's sister Dixie D'Amelio has the ninth most popular account with 122.7 million followers. This new trend has given people a voice and the ability to promote themselves on a platform that is easily accessible to others. Besides entertainment purposes, TikTok has been used as advertisements for companies, promoting artists, and even social movements. TikTok is IN as it allows creativity in a variety of ways, individuals to display their talents for so many, or users to laugh all day at content. There are over 600 million people on TikTok as this has become the most popular app on the Apple Store. TikTok is an app that is used worldwide and available in 155 different countries. It is not surprising that more than one billion videos are viewed daily. People of all ages engage in TikTok but Generation Z makes up the majority of users. Generation Z is the first age group to grow up on the internet and social media. This has caused a change in how work can be viewed. Social media has given users a new viewpoint on what they believe work should be. The nine-to-five that has been normalized by our elders are becoming less interesting due to social media and how users have been shown by their peers that there are so many different ways to make a living. Social Media is encouraging this because Generation Z individuals tend to be on their smartphones all day long and are exposed to seeing how other people are making money in such a new, easy way. Now, they are dying to do the same, therefore, everyone's new favorite job has become being a social media influencer. So, this strikes the first research question, how much has new technology influenced this new form of labor?

In an article published on Forbes, Dennis Kirwan defines a social media influencer as "...people who have large audiences of followers on their media accounts, and leverage this to influence or persuade this following to buy certain products or services" (Kirwan 2021). This job as a social media influencer is directly created through new technologies and is the way that influencer's impact carries throughout social media. New opportunities continue to be created through new jobs from an influencer's social media fame, partnerships, or endorsements. In Nick Srnicek's Platform Capitalism he explains, "Capitalism, when a crisis hits, tends to be reconstructed. New technologies, new organizational forms, new modes of exploitation, new

types of jobs, and new markets all emerge to create a new way of accumulating capital” (Srnicek, Ch. 2-Pg. 1). As smartphones continue to develop the ways people use them continue to develop. Smartphones have allowed content to be spread significantly faster and also in various different ways. For instance, social media has allowed a new brand, singer/dancer, company, or invention, to access a new way of advertising not only for the product itself but also the individual self to be seen each time someone scrolls down their feed! Other content may also include comedy skits, social media challenges, tutorials, (cooking, fixing items, outfit of the day, workouts, etc.) you name it, you may post it, and maybe even become paid!

The basic requirements that qualify someone to be a social media influencer and start earning money by TikTok are discussed in an INSIDER article published by Amanda Perelli where she explains, “To earn money directly from TikTok, users must be 18 years or older, meet a baseline of 10,000 followers, and have accrued at least 100,000 video views in the last 30 days” (Perelli 2021). Depending on the number of followers one has and how popular one becomes, being paid from TikTok is very achievable. In an article posted by a student at UCLA, it’s stated that, “Estimates suggest that a TikTok content creator with 100k followers can earn on average between \$200 to \$1000 per month and a TikTok content creator with 1M+ followers can earn on average between \$1000 to \$5000+ per month” (Patel 2021). Sometimes creators' virality is short lived but then it is those who continue to blossom that become fan favorites. Starting a TikTok does not mean one will automatically gain intensive popularity and become a paid TikToker, this does not happen overnight and in most cases, may not happen at all. In an article D. Bondy Valdovinos explains, “TikTok is a prime platform to explore accidental virality given the bite-sized nature of content between 15 to 60 seconds long and the ease with which TikTok allows users to create new videos based on elements of the video they were just watching (Kaye, Chen, & Zeng, 2020)” (Valdovinos 2021). This accidental virality can be considered as a “one-hit-wonder”, or possibly this could successfully help one become a paid influencer. However, most people have the app as a source of entertainment. To understand more about TikTok, research was completed through interviews with an influencer named Jay Wey, during this, he explains how his fame on social media was accidental. His intentions were just to

document a road trip he took with his wife. However, as the interview states, “We started recording funny videos, and that same day, or the day after, we saw people viewing them,” Wey says. “I was like, ‘What’s going on? You said people weren’t gonna watch this.’ ... The reception was positive, and Wey decided to keep making funny videos, partially fulfilling a childhood dream of becoming a comedian.

Additionally, three men who are very familiar with TikTok in their own way were interviewed. I asked them questions that were similar to Wey’s, and also questions that were different due to how they each use TikTok in their own way. Each of the three who stated that their love for TikTok started as just being a fan, were asked questions about the different stages which range from fans, those who make videos for fun, aspiring influencers, and paid social media influencers. Specifically, one question asked was “how, if possible, one could faster boost followers in any way to be paid quicker?” Interviewees included a fan named Charles Briscoe, an aspiring influencer Randall Harris, and a paid social media influencer Jelani Greene. Also, the research completed on the famous influencer mentioned, Jay Wey, was beneficial. These interviews and research help elaborate on the next research question, can being a paid TikTok social media influencer be a reliable source of income? Is this a source of labor that is dependable? Or is it temporary? The road to this position is not always given or happens overnight, so each influencer and aspiring influencer are at a different point in their career.

Interviewed first was social media influencer Jelani Green. Jelani, also known as AJ, is “TikTok famous” and has 2.1 million followers on TikTok. Green consistently posts content that reaches millions of viewers. During the interview he explained how his first “viral” video was about his story of how he ended up where he is today. AJ explained how he went from an under-recruited high school athlete to a true freshman Division I starter. However, he was then kicked out of school, which led to him going to a junior college. From junior college AJ went on to accept a Division II football scholarship where he excelled and became an NFL draft prospect. AJ’s TikTok video was viewed by 10.5 million people, and although the NFL did not work out, this video opened up several doors and he is now using TikTok as not only his job, but a

platform to advertise a product he in partnership with named "SoHoodie". The brand is very popular among football players specifically, from non-profit youth football organization, Pop Warner, to the NFL, one can see these being worn all over the field. AJ has become so popular he has an "AJ GREENE SOHOODIE" on their website. SoHoodie is advertised in almost all of his TikTok's now and six of his last ten videos have surpassed a million views. He has become a self-made entrepreneur with TikTok as his job. The next question asked was, "what is the coolest thing you've done since becoming an influencer?" His answer was about the time he spent with former NFL star quarterback, Michael Vick. AJ explained how growing up Vick was his favorite player and an idol. Jelani made TikTok's with Vick and in the video, Vick is seen wearing Jelani's SoHoodie product that he advertises.

The next interview conducted was with Randall Harris who is an aspiring influencer that has 12k followers. Randall is a college football player and he explained how his main inspiration for wanting to become an influencer is Name, Image, Likeness (NIL) deals. NIL deals are a new rule by the NCAA which allows college athletes to make money off of their image. He has one-hundred thousand views on multiple clips however these views accumulated over time, so he has not met the qualification for being paid just yet. Although he is not considered a paid influencer, he has struck an NIL endorsement from a popular underwear company named PSG Underwear. This was made possible due to TikTok and he is seen on his page advertising this product as well as his personal brand. Randall's content he posts consists of popular trends. In the interview it was asked, "What things have you done to speed up the process of becoming a social media influencer?" Randall's response was him explaining how he created content with Mikaila Murphy, on TikTok her username is @mikailadancer. Mikaila is a woman who is very popular on social media, and she is an influencer that has 13.4 million followers on TikTok. With millions of views on each clip this was a quick efficient way for Randall to be seen by a big audience with another very popular influencer.

The research question about whether TikTok is a reliable source of income is best answered and elaborated upon thanks to the research on Jay Wey. CNBC's Millennial Money is described

in an article by Yanelly Espinal as “...interviews dive deep into conversations about how they make, spend and save their money” (Espinal). Millennials make up most of TikTok users outside of Generation Z. However, both Gen Z and Millennials usage of TikTok are still on the rise. About forty percent of Gen Z is on TikTok and almost forty percent of Millennials. Jay Wey happened to be one Millennial that was interviewed. Jay Wey has 1.7 million followers and in his interview the author, Nicolas Vega, explained how he is benefiting from TikTok by stating, “Wey considers himself an entrepreneur first and foremost, but his social media success pays the bills. He has landed a number of lucrative brand partnerships that earn him and his wife Sharon, who makes cameos in his videos, around \$120,000 per year” (Vega 2021). This is around ten thousand dollars a month, something anyone is easily capable of making a living from. Due to this job being as flexible as a six-figure paying job gets, and his wife Sharon being a guest star in mostly every video he posts, this job is fun. Wey is enjoying himself as he “works”, in a CNBC article he explained how he views TikTok as just a side hustle which is not that surprising. His most viewed video has 31.4 million views and is still rising. People love his content and as he continues to put similar content out, his audience will continue and support him, and his wife Sharon’s videos.

Job security is an area of discussion that has not really been a thought for most of TikTok’s lifespan, however on one occasion it has been red flagged for TikTok. In an ABC News article by Libby Cathey, it states, “...Trump said on Monday if Microsoft or another “secure” and “very American” company doesn’t buy the U.S. leg of the Chinese-owned operation by Sept.15, the wildly-popular video app will cease operating in the U.S” (Cathey 2021). These claims were due to security concerns that ended up being deemed untrue. Although false, the uncertainty of this new source of labor was suddenly put on pause abruptly. This left viewers and content creators in an uproar. A New York Times article titled in bold letters “TikTok Ban? Creators and Fans Are Big Mad - The uncertainty over the future of the widely popular video app has brought chaos to its user community – and to the entertainment and advertising industries as well” (Lorenz 2020), highlighted that being able to make a TikTok any time, any place, was the

intimate factor behind the new, fun source of labor. TikTok users were devastated at just the thought of having that taken from them during the pandemic.

Job flexibility is essential and a huge reason why this job is such a new popular source of labor. The more our peers continue to use their social media profiles as a platform for themselves, the more their audience sees them, and this inspires them. The effect the new technologies, like smartphones, have on this generation is not only addicting, but contagious. As said in Uberland, the author explains, "The sharing economy promised to save the day for a population shaken by the Great Recession: using technology, millions of people across society would now be able to efficiently pool and share their limited resources. The seeds of Uber took root in a climate of profound economic uncertainty. After the recession hit in 2007, shockwaves of the economic downturn rippled across the globe..." (Rosenblat, Pg 3). Just as Uber, new jobs like TikTok have become capable due to smartphones and other new technologies. Uber partners with drivers seeking to earn income and allows anyone who meets the criteria drive their own personal car at their convience. TikTok is similar because the company partners with content creators and gives them a space where, at their own leisure, they are able to promote themselves and their content for money. By that, it's meant the next dancer, or singer, or anyone who might not have had the confidence before, can find inspiration from an influencer who may be a friend, a role model, or just another person they follow on TikTok. If they can do it, you can do it and the role of a nine-to-five being the "norm" for labor in America will continue and diminish. The influences of new technologies continue to impact people today and specifically, allows stars to be found. New technologies also help people become inspired to participate this new labor that can be merely seen as a hobby. TikTok is a valuable source of labor, this labor is just as dependable as the content creators' produce and have produced that their audience initially fell in love with and made them the influencer they are today.

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