

'Bite-sized' TikTok draws a Gen Z tired of Google. But misinformation remains rife

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

When Ashley Storino wants a new pair of black boots or book recommendations, she knows what gets results—and it isn't Google.

No blue links for this 22-year-old digital marketer. Rather than wade through pages of search results, she opens TikTok instead, quickly scans video after video and checks the comments to make sure she can trust the content. Only when she knows precisely what she's looking for does she turn to Google first.

"Let's say I want to find the best mascara. Before I used to look it up on Google and those results would feature articles and blogs with top 10 lists or top lists. As someone who has worked in marketing and PR, I know a lot of these lists are often, if not always, influenced by outside parties or brands trying to get products in an article," Storino said.

"Now I turn to TikTok to get honest reviews from real people. I can look up a brand of mascara or 'best mascara' and there are all of these people who have done reviews and can speak to the product. It's much more relatable and you know who's telling you the information. And then you can go into the comments section and see if the same information is reinforced."

Is Tiktok becoming the new Google?

A growing number of young people are using the short-form video app better known for [dance moves](#) and viral hijinks the way others use Google, to find a new lunch spot or a film to watch, plan a weekend getaway or update their wardrobe.

They also rely on TikTok for questions that used to be Google's bread-and-butter such as health tips or a skin care regimen.

"Consumers are switching to social media, specifically TikTok, because it feels more authentic," said Jenna Drenten, associate professor of marketing at Loyola University Chicago. "Google feels incredibly overwhelming in today's internet economy. It's just inundated with

content."

TikTok is taking on Google as a search engine

A Google commissioned study of U.S. users ages 18 to 24 found that nearly 40% use TikTok or Instagram to search online.

"We keep learning, over and over again, that new internet users don't have the expectations and the mindset that we have become accustomed to," Prabhakar Raghavan, who runs Google's knowledge and information organization, said in July at Fortune's Brainstorm Tech conference.

Google, under heavy antitrust scrutiny in the United States and Europe, has incentive to point out rising competition. "You know, none of us were talking about TikTok three years ago," Sundar Pichai, CEO of Google parent Alphabet, said at Vox Media's Code conference earlier this month.

Google has more than 90% market share and isn't likely to get toppled. Whereas TikTok can be an inspirational place to find a Halloween costume or ideas for your fall wardrobe, Google is the fastest way to look up a news article or get directions to the post office.

Google spokesperson Mallory De Leon said the company's research "did not find that they are using TikTok instead of Google, but often in addition to."

Teens and young adults prefer TikTok because it's more visual and authentic

These changing habits among teens and [young adults](#) signal a generational sea change, says Natalie Pennington, an assistant professor

of communication at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

With many videos less than a minute long, "I can consume that information and move on quickly," Pennington said.

"There's a very visual component to it," she added.

Pennington turned to TikTok when she was searching for a travel bag that would fit Spirit Airlines' personal item dimensions.

"It was fantastic," she said. "(I could) see it and see people load the bag versus a Google search where someone would be like, 'this is the best bag.'"

Social media apps like TikTok and Instagram also give users the ability to interact with content creators with comments, questions and likes.

"It's a pretty social process, which people can gain a lot of gratification," said Yini Zhang, an assistant professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo's Department of Communication.

Karishma Jashani relies on the internet for all sorts of questions: Where should she go for date night? How will a certain makeup brand look on her skin tone? What's a good salad recipe?

But instead of typing her queries into a traditional [search engine](#), Jashani turns to social media. The 26-year-old content creator said she goes to Google for less than 30% of her searches now, reserving it for "serious" matters like maps and news.

For most everything else, she opens TikTok.

"It's so much more effective," said Jashani, who is based in Singapore.

"It's just faster to get information rather than navigating through multiple sources" on Google.

Unlike Google, TikTok has a feeling of immediacy, Jashani says.

"It's so bite-sized," she told U.S. TODAY. "With Google, it's more static where you just have to scroll through a bunch of text."

But should you trust TikTok?

Zhang noted that apps like TikTok and Instagram have an advantage by sourcing from dozens of users—"average people from all corners of society"—instead of a few large websites or media outlets.

While that can help broadcast more diverse voices, it can also lead to lower quality results. Zhang warned that turning to social media for information could be a hotbed for misinformation and disinformation.

TikTok increasingly markets itself as a place for people to learn. TikTok last month began testing a new feature that highlights key words in the comment section that bring users to search results for the term. Earlier this year it launched an ad campaign, #TikTokTaughtMe, that launched the slogan "there is no limit to the knowledge that can be discovered on TikTok."

Yet users, mostly teens and young adults, routinely encounter false or misleading claims when they search for information on TikTok, according to a NewsGuard study.

Almost 20% of searches NewsGuard sampled on news topics such as COVID vaccines and the Russian invasion of Ukraine contained misinformation, NewsGuard found.

"TikTok—whose library of user-generated videos can be easily searched by typing in keywords in its search bar—repeatedly delivered videos containing false claims in the first 20 results, often within the first five," the NewsGuard report said. "Google, by comparison, provided higher-quality and less-polarizing results, with far less misinformation."

Viral TikToks can be dangerous. The Food and Drug Administration warned consumers that a hack to keep avocados fresh longer by putting them in an airtight container filled with water inside the refrigerator could make people seriously ill.

"I do see a lot of downsides related to this trend, particularly with TikTok, which is such an algorithmically driven platform," Zhang said. "It's difficult for people to spot misinformation and disinformation."

While many internet users have been trained on how to spot trusted sources on [google](#)—websites with a .edu or .gov tag, for example—the same rules don't apply to [social media](#).

"I think it's more entertaining than informative," Zhang said.

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