

How Covid-19 Caused Social Media Apps to Pivot with New Features

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As Covid-19 spread across the U.S. and we started pivoting to our digital-centric lives, we've developed new needs from our daily apps. To keep up with demand, social media giants have been busy rolling out new features and tools for their users.

Due to the pandemic, we've all had our digital habits thrown for a loop. Even how we engage in social media has changed, with best times to post shifted, and a noticeable drop-off in activity past 6 p.m. as people have started prioritizing their post-workday needs.

To keep up with society's new digital traits, social media engineers have had to work tirelessly to launch more efficient and simpler features. Here's a roundup of how the biggest social media platforms pivoted due to Covid-19.

TikTok versus everybody.

If there's a clear winner of 2020, it's TikTok, the video-sharing app that saw increased downloads since the Covid-19 outbreak began. In January of this year, TikTok brought in 22.2 million unique visitors within the U.S. Those visitors nearly doubled by April, when most U.S. citizens were in the middle of their quarantine. Globally, TikTok brought in 315 million unique visitors, making it the most-downloaded quarter for any app.

There's a reason TikTok has become a worldwide phenomenon, too. With people feeling isolated and anxious over the nearly year-long pandemic, they're turning to activities that offer instant gratification. Psychologist Dr. Prerna Kohli explains how this format can encourage reward-seeking behavior:

"The app is easy to use and the content doesn't require much talent or know-how or even literacy, allowing users to access all kinds of crowds. It's a quick bandaid for your boredom, where your actions are mostly rewarded and you receive positive conditioning for being yourself. Nobody's interested in the make-up you're wearing, only in the message you're conveying."

TikTok's success brought out copycats.

Seeing this TikTok takeover put pressure on other dominant platforms to step up their offerings. Just within the past year, Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube have put forward efforts to recreate that TikTok magic. The three apps worked hard over the past few months to develop new features inspired by TikTok.

- Instagram Reels

- Instagram saw success when it took Snapchat's model and made it better with Stories. Now, the Facebook-owned platform hopes to do the same with Instagram Reels. The feature, which launched in early August, is similar to TikTok's format: users create 15 or 30-second videos put to music. So, how's it been performing? Well, the New York Times called it a "dud" and a little more than a month after its launch, Instagram Reels had to update its features due to user displeasure.

▪ **Snapchat**

- Snapchat's pre-Covid-19 partnership with Warner Music Group was inspired by TikTok's marriage of music and video. The app will have its own music library for snaps, but will not roll out a video feed like TikTok or Instagram Reels. In August, Snapchat tested its music/video pairing feature in Australia and New Zealand. No updates on when it's hitting the U.S., however.

▪ **YouTube Shorts**

- YouTube Shorts hopes to remind everyone who is the video king. Shorts allows you to create short-form videos within the YouTube app and is currently beta testing in India. Unique to Shorts is a multi-segment camera that allows users to string multiple videos together. Like TikTok, Shorts will have a music library to choose from. Unlike TikTok, Shorts will only allow 15-second video uploads.

With most of these features still in testing mode and Instagram Reels only being a couple months out from its release date, it's hard to tell if the TikTok-inspired features will stick.

The number one problem shared among entrepreneurs today is finding, vetting, hiring, and retaining expertise.

Facebook saw opportunities to streamline.

When it comes to Covid-19 response, Facebook has been on top of it. The conglomerate saw a chance to fill some Covid-size holes and put efficiencies in place to make living digitally simpler. Taking a note from Zoom's book, Facebook launched Rooms, a video-meeting feature that holds up to 50 people per room. Rooms have no time limit, can be promoted via link in Facebook feeds to help grow audiences and users don't need a Facebook account to use the feature.

Likewise, online shopping skyrocketed during quarantine, and Facebook looked at ways it could improve its Instagram shopping experience for users. Brands have utilized Instagram's visual-friendly format to promote and sell products, however, users had to leave the app to make purchases. Now Instagram offers in-app purchases through its Checkout feature, as well as buying options during Instagram Live Shopping events.

Facebook is also using its Instagram and WhatsApp ownership to streamline between the apps. In August, it was announced that the apps would share a combined messaging platform. Currently, users have the choice to combine Facebook Messenger with Instagram's chat option but the merge won't be complete until WhatsApp gets involved.

Live event and streaming options increased.

As we settled into our homes full time, Zoom quickly became the go-to platform for events, offering options many social

media apps didn't have in place. As we've had to come up with clever ways to meet and present remotely, we have also learned how limited we were in options we would have never thought of pre-Covid-19.

The quickest shift is when Facebook brought back its Live With feature in April. The platform got rid of the option to do a Facebook Live stream with friends in November, not predicting our world's status just a few months later. Another quick and simple shift Facebook did was enable Instagram Live video viewing and commenting from desktop. With more people utilizing Live for events and meetings, a desktop option offers users more viewing convenience.

People are connecting more than ever on Facebook-owned platforms, too. Between February and March, total messaging went up 50 percent and Instagram and Facebook Live events doubled within a week's time. Additionally, group calls increased 1,000 percent within a month.

Boosted steaming numbers aren't unique to just Facebook, though. Between March and April, streaming in general nearly doubled and the industry as a whole is up 99 percent. It was Twitch, a live-streaming platform for gamers, that saw the biggest growth of all, averaging 1.645 *billion* hours viewed per month.

And who knows? With how 2020 is going, chances are things will shift again over the next few months and this article will be obsolete.

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