I tried replacing Google with TikTok, and it worked better than I thought

TikTok is the new Google. Or so some people say. As TikTok grows, Google, in particular, has begun to describe the app as a whole new way of creating and consuming the internet and maybe an existential threat to its own search engine. Prabhakar Raghavan, the SVP of search at Google, said in July that "something like almost 40 percent of young people, when they are looking for a place for lunch, they don't go to Google Maps or Search, they go to TikTok or Instagram." More recently, *The New York Times* and others have talked to young internet users and found that, in fact, they're turning to TikTok for more and more of what you might call Google-able things.

On one hand, there's nothing particularly surprising about this: the internet is just becoming a more visual place. YouTube has long been the internet's second most popular search engine, and for a lot of things, a video is actually the best possible answer. (It's also worth noting that Raghavan and Google have a real incentive to hype up other search engines because competition in the space makes Google look less like a scary monopoly to regulators.) But do you really want to watch a bunch of videos about deli sandwiches just to find the best deli sandwich near you? And beyond that, how many of the Google search use cases can TikTok really replicate?

I tried to find out and, over a few days, TikTok'd every query I had before I Googled it. (You can also listen to how it went

on the most recent episode of *The Vergecast*.) What I found was, in a sense, not terribly surprising: there are things for which TikTok is an absolutely useful search engine, even if TikTok's algorithm and content aren't quite tuned for that yet. But for what Google does best, there's no competition. Ultimately, I don't think Google is actually nervous about TikTok's growing search prowess. But YouTube probably should be.

I started with lunch because, apparently, that's what all us cool young kids are doing today. I searched the phrase "restaurants in my neighborhood" and got nothing useful. Then I searched "restaurants in del ray VA," which is where I live, and the results were surprisingly useful. Matt & Tony's is a good new restaurant down the street from me; Del Ray Cafe is a staple of the neighborhood. The next result I scrolled to was for a restaurant in Del Ray Beach, California, which is literally thousands of miles from me. Next flip: Pork Barrel BBQ, which is a few blocks from me and pretty good. Then another Matt & Tony's recommendation. Then back to California. Then Matt & Tony's again.

None of these videos were branded websites or the standard Yelp / TripAdvisor fare that tends to be at the top of Google search results. Some were made by TikTokers trying to be local influencers, like DC Spot and District Eats. Others were just foodies showing off their latest finds. I don't know if I trust any of them individually, and the information density here is pretty low — it took a lot of swiping and watching to get the names of three restaurants — but I did get a decent vibe of each place. And Matt & Tony's really is pretty good.

Food search, in general, is a real strength for TikTok. It's an excellent tool for finding recipes, especially simple ones; a search for "chocolate chip cookies" led me to a feed of every type and variation of a recipe I could imagine. The videos often move really fast, so you have to either take notes or watch them a hundred times, but there's a huge amount

of good information in the results.

Where TikTok search really falls down is the most basic feature of Google: quick access to other stuff on the internet. The most popular searches on Google are words like “Facebook” and “Amazon,” and TikTok is precisely no help there unless what you actually wanted is an endless supply of videos showing weird junk people bought on Amazon.

Even beyond the basics, so much of what people search is specific and transactional: “USPS tracking” and “weather tomorrow” and “coffee shops near me.” Google is many things, but it’s mostly a glorified question-and-answer service or a way to find more information on the internet. Asking questions like “who was the 16th president of the United States,” “how many ounces in a cup,” or “what time does the Super Bowl start?” largely gets you nowhere on TikTok. (The second video in my presidential search did feature Abraham Lincoln, which is something, but my measurement question just led to a bunch of mug hacks and weird wikiHow-inspired videos. The Super Bowl was just a bunch of people being mad at their friends for being late.) Part of the problem is that TikTok creators just haven’t been making content with search in mind — but also, helpfully answering these questions mostly makes for bad video.

That said, the number one most-asked question in Google searches, according to one study, is “what to watch.” Here, TikTok is *excellent.* The first recommendation I got was for *The Weekend Away*, a thriller on Netflix; the next was a lightning round of reviews for *Industry, Defending Jacob,* and several other new shows; after that was just one creator’s list of “5 shows I love.” Nothing about the results felt personalized or like it understood my taste, and yet I came away with a bunch of good ideas about what to watch. And flipping through TikToks is a much more fun way to browse than reading Google results or swiping through rows of Netflix images.

In my experience so far, TikTok is like a choose-your-own-rabbit-hole adventure story, which is a new but fun way to think about search. You can just type “Billie Eilish” or “ASMR” or “best soccer plays” and watch as long as you want.

TikTok is like a choose-your-own-rabbit-hole adventure story, which is a new but fun way to think about search

In many cases, TikTok is actually much better at this than YouTube because the structure of the app — quick, scrollable videos — forces creators to be much more efficient. One thing I’ve searched for a lot is “back stretches” because I have back problems and sit in front of a computer all day. TikTok is perfect for this, and the results don’t come with the long preambles you get on YouTube — it’s just 30-second video stretches after 30-second video stretches. It rules. The results aren’t always as accurate or targeted, but TikTok makes it much easier to flip through your options to find one that works. #TikTokTaughtMe is a huge success story, too, and it goes right at the kind of DIY “how do I unclog my sink” content YouTube is so well known for.

If search really is a long-term focus for TikTok, the platform will need to change a bit. Right now, creators only get one link in their bio, so you get lots of videos that tell you to look at a new thing in their bio, but that link is already gone by the time I see it. Also, TikTok is all about the For You page, which means people are using sounds and doing challenges and generally everything they can to show up when you open the app. Longer, more in-depth, evergreen helpful content isn’t really going to work in that space, so TikTok’s going to have to find a way to incentivize people to make search-friendly stuff, too.

Search also presents new content moderation issues for TikTok. It’s one thing to influence what users see on their For You page, but it’s another entirely to make sure people see the right things when they’re actively looking for something. A

recent NewsGuard study found a huge amount of misinformation on TikTok and that “for a sampling of searches on prominent news topics, almost 20 percent of the videos presented as search results contained misinformation.” TikTok says it doesn’t allow “harmful misinformation,” but enforcing that rule is proving just as hard as it is for Google and others.

TikTok won’t replace Google for me — or anyone — anytime soon. But it’s increasingly clear that 10 blue links — with a bunch of barely labeled ads at the top, a big shopping widget, and a lot of links to Google services — isn’t always the right interface for search. Google is trying to make search more human and give people a way to ask more questions more easily. TikTok is instead offering an endlessly watchable library of endless content on almost any subject. I don’t know that I’ll ever end up making these chocolate chip cookie recipes I’ve been watching for an hour, but it’s really fun to watch other people make them.

https://www.theverge.com/23365101/tiktok-search-google-replacement