TikTok took over VidCon, and YouTube is next

Pandemonium at VidCon is generally a good signifier of what people actually care about. Last year, it was YouTuber Tana Mongeau, who threw a disastrous, off-venue mini convention after being snubbed by VidCon. Before that, controversial personality Logan Paul caused a stampede just months after becoming one of the most detested YouTubers for his suicide forest video.

Ever since it began in 2009, VidCon — the premiere convention for online creators — has revolved around the who's-who of YouTube. This year, YouTubers took a backseat to the creator scene's new rockstars: TikTokers.

Conventions are a lot like high school — everyone wants to be invited to the best parties with the coolest people. This year, that party belonged to TikTok. It took place at a bowling alley in the basement of an outdoor mall where teenagers spilled out onto the sidewalk. A white luxury sports car was parked outside, and attendees guessed whether it belonged to TikTok's scheduled performer, rapper Ty Dolla Sign, or some other celebrity in attendance. Aspiring TikTok stars, friends of TikTokers, and floating teens who seemed to have received word of the party hung out together by the doors of the venue, running to and fro a couple of times when another way into the building opened up. Instead of people huddling together to vlog, teens flocked to one another to collab on a TikTok.

One teenager, who told *The Verge* she started visiting VidCon four years ago, called this year's crowd "unrecognizable." She was with a younger friend and, while we sat on the steps

looking out over the carnival aesthetic that fell over VidCon, she joked, “My friend is trying to talk to that TikToker over there. I don’t even know who he is.”

His name was Cash Baker, and he has 44,000 TikTok fans. At VidCon, his name was called out by young teens and their parents, who wanted the 16-year-old to take a selfie, perform a move for their own TikTok accounts, or just give them a hug. Baker is a popular TikToker, but he wasn’t the most influential person at VidCon. What he did have, along with almost every other TikToker who attended this year, was accessibility.

One big reason TikTokers emerged as the main attraction at VidCon was because they roamed within the larger attendee body. YouTube creators loomed over the convention as royalty; they stared down at young, obsessive fans from massive posters hanging from the convention building, and walked around flanked by security guards, passing through secret passageways to their destinations. YouTube’s biggest stars were still the convention’s main draw, but their inaccessibility borne out of new wave celebrity alienated their biggest fans.

“Could TikTok dethrone YouTube as online queen” seemed to be the question on everyone’s mind. TikTok was a conversation starter at almost every industry party, including YouTube’s official shindig. People lined up for TikTok-centric panels, many of which were about how to become a viral sensation, until there was only standing room. There was no question TikTok had arrived, but the larger mystery lurking just beneath the surface is how ethereal TikTok’s dominance will be.

TikTok isn’t the first app to court new creator collectives from established platforms. Vine also did it between 2012 and 2017. People flocked to the short-form video app, but the bigger Vine got, the more vocal its influential users became about wanting to get paid. Apps like Vine and TikTok can help

create overnight celebrities, but they're still based in recreational fun, not sustaining large swaths of creators looking to turn their accounts into sustainable income. That's where YouTube has always been able to stand out.

"These events were indicators of a paradigm shift," social media analyst Daniel Sinclair tweeted. "The question is whether mobile-first video is a step-change, or a shift – and Vine's story is crucial."

Vine may be the greatest predictor of where TikTokers are headed. Vine focused on six-second videos, encouraged abstract memes and quirky humor, and quickly became popular among teens. The fact that all people needed to join in was a cellphone, instead of expensive editing suites and a camera, was an added bonus.

"Viners," as they were known then, were exploding in popularity and appeared poised to take over the world. Then suddenly they weren't. Vine, which was bought by Twitter in 2012 for $30 million, failed to keep up with competitors, and Twitter shut it down in 2017. With the app gone, and in some cases well before it faded, some of its most popular personalities leveraged their fame and moved to YouTube full time. Lele Pons, David Dobrik, Liza Koshy, and, perhaps most famously, Jake and Logan Paul went from beloved teen Vine stars to more mainstream YouTube celebrities. On YouTube, their careers – and earning potential – thrived.

Yet while the migration to YouTube helped Vine stars finally monetize, these creators were suddenly facing a loss of accessibility. It's something Logan Paul encountered during the stampede caused at his first VidCon appearance as a "featured creator." At VidCon, an event where scoring clout is just as important as meeting your favorite creator, having access to famous TikTokers walking through the crowd makes the convention worth attending.

“If you really want to know what YouTube’s about, you got to get in YouTube.”
“These TikTok kids are going to replace half the YouTubers that are at VidCon this year,” YouTuber Philip DeFranco tweeted on Friday. “While y’all are onstage they’ve already shot and posted 79 collab TikToks each. No shade. Just respecting the hustle.”

YouTube’s monetization features are far from perfect, but so far, no other platform can compete with the breadth of its offerings. The most important of those is advertising revenue that lets creators earn money for each video they upload. No other video platform has crafted a similar revenue mechanism at the scale the Google-owned platform has, and that still makes YouTube tantalizing. Creators can also net sponsorship deals, and increasingly, sell merch, subscriptions, and live event access.

Twitch offers ad revenue for creators, but it requires spending long hours streaming to virtually no one to eventually build a successful career. Facebook is trying to build its creator department, but its pace is glacial and its reputation among teens in tatters. YouTube offers the easiest ad revenue solution alongside a wide, existing audience that could lead to more career stability and financial opportunity. No platform has ever really competed with YouTube at that level. Just today, *Bloomberg* reported on the messy history of YouTube’s dominant rise in the video advertising industry, and how it now captures a majority of the $16.3 billion digital video ad industry in the US, leaving old rivals in the dust.

What TikTok can do that YouTube has lost the ability to is allow fresh-faced creators to break through the noise. Discoverability is better on TikTok than YouTube because there’s much less competition. Creators are using TikTok as a place to bring fans with them to YouTube, cultivating a channel presence there, too.

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“TikTok is launching this new generation of vloggers, singers, commentary, sketch, etc etc,” DeFranco continued on Twitter. “You cultivate an audience in a newer, less saturated, younger market and if you’re worth it, they’ll follow you wherever you go.”

VidCon became a four-day reminder that being on an exciting new platform and having the chance to mingle with fans is crucial to reaching the next level of success. But recognizing that this is a luxury afforded to TikTokers because they aren’t featured YouTube creators is equally necessary. VidCon’s aforementioned disasters with Tana Mongeau and Logan Paul reiterated that YouTube’s main creators, which are still the big draw, needed distance from overzealous fans. There was little wiggle room for YouTubers to simply hang out in the pavilion. So this year, TikTokers saw an opportunity and jumped on it.

None of this is new. In 2009, documentarian Ester Brym released a movie called *Butterflies*. It documented the rise of YouTube creators, examining what separated the new age of creator from traditional Hollywood. Early on in the doc, Renetto, one of the site’s earliest vloggers, talks animatedly about why he loves being on YouTube in 2009.

What happens when TikTok stars want to get paid, move to YouTube, and become inaccessible at VidCon?
“YouTube’s about keeping it real,” he says in the documentary. “YouTube’s about vlogging. YouTube’s not about big, fancy cameras or crazy cool microphones. If you really want to know what YouTube’s about, you got to get in YouTube.”

That’s almost untrue of YouTube’s “top notch” creator culture today — the people coming to VidCon as featured creators. They have nice cameras, lavish LA homes, and often work with editors and small production teams to shoot videos. They have

more in common with traditional filmmaking than the next generation of DIY personalities, like those on TikTok, and that became a noticeable dynamic to this year's VidCon attendees.

One person told *The Atlantic* that YouTubers "have too much confidence to the point where they think they're too good to be around their lower fans." What happens when people's favorite TikTok stars want to start getting paid, move to YouTube, and become inaccessible at VidCon just a couple of years down the road?

TikTok may be experiencing a short-lived popularity boom, like its various predecessors, but its noticeable impact on the industry and young fans is a sign that YouTube will probably undergo a significant cultural change as new stars start looking to monetize. YouTube has managed to remain young by ensuring it offers a space teens want to visit and share to, and giving them money in the process. The site is at an inflection point, post-Viner invasion, where stars have to accept they're not the cool kids on the block anymore. Working with TikTokers as they unavoidably flock to the site will force a breath of fresh air on YouTube.

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