

REPORT

# VOICE OF YOUTH

## WHAT'S WRONG WITH TIKTOK?!

Dialogues @ School Program 2022

**11 August 2022**



# Table of Contents

<b>Background</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>About Dialogues @ School</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>About The Brisbane Dialogues</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>About TikTok</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Points from the Dialogues</b>	<b>9</b>
<i>Differences with Other Platforms</i>	9
<i>Positive Aspects of TikTok</i>	10
<i>Issues of Concern</i>	12
<i>Miscellaneous Points Raised</i>	16
<i>Possible Solutions</i>	17
<b>Next Steps</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Credits</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>23</b>

## Background

Between late March and late May this year, 13 schools from Townsville to Sydney participated in the inaugural round of Dialogues @ School, the schools-based program of The Brisbane Dialogues Inc.

Each school staged its own, independent dialogue event on the same, deliberately ambiguous, topic: *What's Wrong With TikTok?!*, with student panellists, guided by external, expert moderators provided and/or briefed by The Brisbane Dialogues to emphasise the importance of civil discourse and the differences between dialogue and debate.

A total of 65 student panellists engaged in thoughtful, lively, well-informed, original and always-civil discussions, with the participation of many other students (and sometimes adults) in the audience - a great credit to their respective schools and particularly to the teachers who made a huge effort to stage these events on top of their normal workload in very busy school schedules, often with few resources.

This report attempts to distil the main facts, issues, opinions and possible ways forward that emerged from the dialogues. It is not intended to be comprehensive, more a sample of the many in-depth discussions, and a stage along the way to further dialogue and possible action in an area of great importance to the wellbeing of young people, and arguably the nation and the world.



## About Dialogues @ School

Dialogues @ School is The Brisbane Dialogues' schools-based program - a significant civic and pedagogic initiative to stimulate collaborative discussions on complex topics among teenagers and school communities. The program is intended to encourage civic-mindedness and civil discourse amongst students and demonstrate within school and local communities what genuine dialogue looks like - respectful, thoughtful, charitable discussion between people in good faith.

### Program Description

- Schools conduct their own dialogue events on a youth-focused topic, with guidance and support from The Brisbane Dialogues
- Dialogues are held between student panellists and a moderator provided and/or briefed by The Brisbane Dialogues
- Each school produces a video recording of their event, from which a highlights package is produced by The Brisbane Dialogues (to come)
- A report on “The Voice of Youth” on the topic is also produced with the help of university student volunteers
- The report and video are distributed and publicised

## Schools Participating in the 2022 Inaugural Round

**Anglican Church Grammar School (Churchie),**  
East Brisbane Qld

**Queensland Academy Science Mathematics  
& Technology (QASMT),** Toowong Qld

**Calamvale Community College,**  
Calamvale Qld

**Randwick Girls High School,**  
Randwick NSW

**Genesis Christian College,**  
Bray Park Qld

**Somerville House,**  
South Brisbane Qld

**Kirwan State High School,**  
Townsville Qld

**St Margaret's Anglican Girls School,**  
Ascot Qld

**Mt Alvernia College,**  
Kedron Qld

**St Paul's School,**  
Bald Hills Qld

**Newtown High School of the Performing Arts,**  
Newtown NSW

**St Peter's Lutheran College,**  
Indooroopilly Qld

**Queensland Academy Creative Industries (QACI),**  
Kelvin Grove Qld

## Next Round (2023)

Given the success and affirmation of the inaugural round in terms of The Brisbane Dialogues' mission, it is planned to scale the program to approximately 100 schools across Australia in conjunction with like-minded partners such as universities, think tanks, educational consultants and democracy advocacy groups.

Participants in 2022 are encouraged to spread the word to other schools, students and teachers. Expressions of interest to be involved in the next round in any capacity are welcome.



# About The Brisbane Dialogues

We are a wholly independent, neutral, intergenerational, all-volunteer, not-for-profit project to foster better discussions about big ideas and issues. We are determinedly non-partisan and non-aligned and aspire to being non-parochial and inclusive.

Our mission is to demonstrate what better discussions look like, and help others conduct genuine dialogues.

Our flagship is the Big Dialogue series of public events: long-form, moderated dialogues between widely differing experts, on complex issues, with high production values, in a congenial environment to encourage guest involvement.

We also:

- Conduct private events, including the First Tuesday Club series for active volunteers and supporters
- Organise the Dialogues @ School program, and
- Support and collaborate with diverse organisations about other dialogue events and formats
- Publish Queensland Talks, a showcase of ideas-based talks and discussion events by many organisations

We are Australia's first dedicated civil discourse organisation and an expanding corner of the public square.

Our values are Civility, Civic-mindedness, Curiosity, Neutrality, Independence, Inclusion. Our goal is to be a preeminent facilitator of dialogue globally.

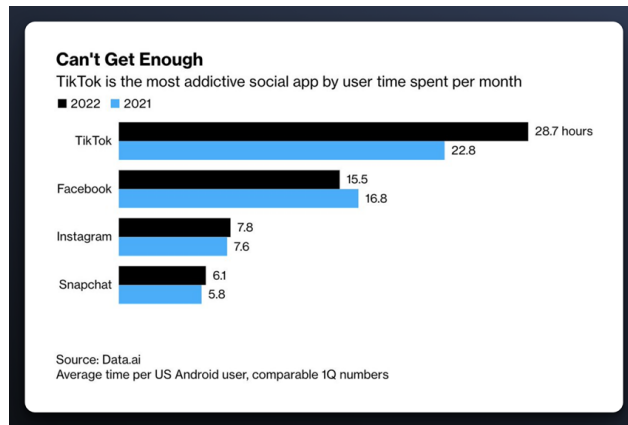
The Brisbane Dialogues is *not* a think tank, or an advocacy body for any cause except that of dialogue and civil discourse generally. Therefore this report is simply a distillation of 13 independent discussions held by school partners for informational and promotional purposes, even though it may be used by participants to advocate their individual positions on the topic.

# About TikTok

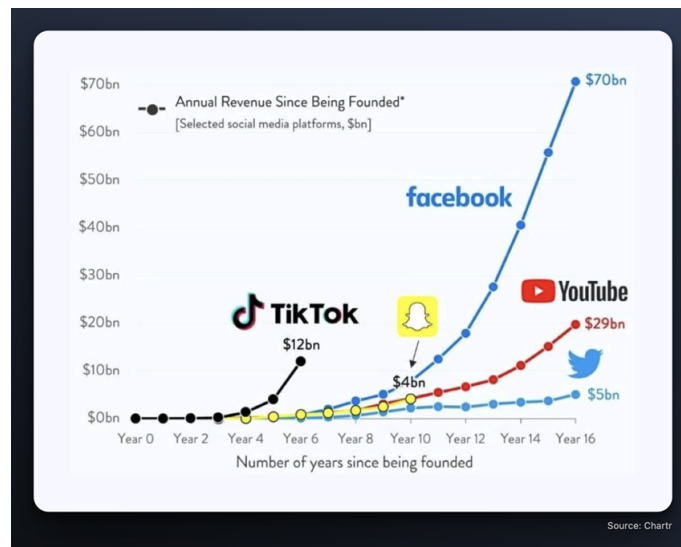


- Short video-based social media platform which evolved mainly from user-generated music video-based platform [musical.ly](https://www.musical.ly)
- Chinese-owned by unlisted company ByteDance, but banned in China (where a similar app with separate content called Douyin is operated by the same parent)
- Banned in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Iran and other countries; in policy review in the USA in particular
- Usage exploded during the pandemic in 2020/21
- Over half of users are aged 16-24
- 3 bn downloads (the first to reach this outside the Meta quartet of Facebook/Messenger/WhatsApp/Instagram)
- 1 bn monthly users, increasing steadily - though still far behind Facebook at 2.9 bn as well as YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram and WeChat
- Daily watch times per user are larger than other comparable platforms. In the US, the *average* user:

- Spends as much time on TikTok as they do on Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat combined



- Views TikTok for 90 minutes per day versus 56 minutes for YouTube.
- TikTok already has the largest in-app consumer spend of any app or game (US\$840m in Q1 2022).
- Total revenue (including advertising and sale of data) is growing much faster than other major platforms did in their early years.



(various internet sources, in particular [data.ai](#) and [Statista](#).)



# Points from the Dialogues

## Differences with Other Platforms

- Sheer size and volume of content
- Short video focus <30 secs
- Automatically selects what gets fed to users - Instagram and Facebook feeds are based more on who or what users choose to follow
- Rapid, continuous, ultra-personalisation of content served by algorithms
- More anonymous, separated user experience than Instagram, which creates more social obligations to follow
- Extreme ease of video creation and sharing combined with leads to lack of self-editing and -regulation
- Short video format mitigates against nuances and complexities of argument
- Short video also results in cross-platform penetration
- Takes “attention economy” to the next level
- The ability to report content as ‘not interested’ or to block on the user’s ‘For You’ page is hard to access, reducing personal control over one’s feed

# Positive Aspects of TikTok

## Pure entertainment

- Huge range of passive and active fun content - not just dance videos!
- Provides stress relief from and reward for doing school work

## Creativity

- Content base inspires users to create
- Examples and training encourages and empowers personal creativity - providing inspiration, examples and training for content creation, lowering production costs (note same is true for nefarious content)

## Education and learning

- It is a different and supplementary way of deepening knowledge on serious as well as entertaining subjects, often both, e.g. law (one US lawyer has 6m followers), providing a lot of information in bite-sized format which appeals to younger people
- Source of new ideas and perspectives for young people, outside of school and family

## Social benefits

- Important personal and social outlet and force for good, mitigating against isolation effects of the pandemic - actually good for the mental health of a lot of people
- Inclusive and empowering, a channel for personal expression, “giving everybody a voice”, including marginalised communities and victims e.g. of sexual assault
- Provides community and belonging and a (relatively) safe place for marginalised and other niche groups - the algorithm facilitates linking up in interest groups

- Dissemination of good information to a younger generation on social and political subjects, educating and motivating a lot of young people who might otherwise not be.
- Platform for social and political involvement and activism
- Discussions can lead to solutions to social problems, on local and larger scales

## **Financial**

- Alternative income opportunities for content creators, jobs, economic opportunities, including providing second chances for people who have had career setbacks.

## Issues of Concern

The largest part of the discussions were generally taken up with the issues and problems posed by TikTok, although there was an impressive nuance in most, where offsetting factors and the possibility of cures being worse than the disease were discussed. It was often noted that many of the issues were not unique to TikTok, but they were often worse, in some cases much worse, because of TikTok's features and uptake among young people.

## Developmental effects

There was wide awareness among panellists that young minds and personalities in general are undeveloped or developing and consensus there is a negative impact on social and mental development of all young users.

- Short video format combined with ease of scrolling:
  - Shortens concentration spans
  - Causes students to lose track of time, affecting schoolwork and sense of reality and wasting time
  - Binge watching 30-second videos becomes hours lost
- Extreme addictiveness/short-term gratification:
  - Instant access to passive entertainment anytime, anywhere
  - Dopamine hits from likes, comments and followers
  - TikTok (like Facebook) exploits “positive intermittent reinforcement” psychological techniques derived from the gambling industry
  - Ease of purchasing
- Age limits are not enforced - and probably not enforceable as things are
- Psychological, developmental and educational impacts of are untested and largely uncontrolled
- Commercial interest not public interest is driving all this

## Mental health

Almost every panel discussion dwelt on this aspect. The main points were:

- Addictiveness and long periods spent on negative videos can lead to depression and even suicidal behaviour
- Body image/self-esteem impacts, more on girls, based on an ideal of rich, white, conventionally attractive images promoted, combined with lack of transparency about editing and filtering content (compared with Instagram)
- Illnesses and disorders can become trends, e.g. eating disorders
- Romanticisation of mental illness, to the extent that some young users feel like they *should* be depressed, even leading to faking illnesses, e.g. a recent scandal involving a content creator, 'ticsandroses' *pretending* to have Tourette's Syndrome
- Bullying is widespread, affecting the self-image and self-esteem of many
- Unhealthy perceptions of self-worth based on numbers of comments/likes.
- Students' awareness of addiction and time-wasting in itself can have negative self-esteem effects
- Fear of missing out (FOMO) - peer pressure to keep up with trends and social developments leads to stress and negative behaviours

## Physical health and harm

- Peer pressure and trend-following can lead to physical harm, e.g. four deaths of children under 12 yo from blackout challenge
- Encourages dieting obsessions and body positivity to the point of glorifying obesity, in the view of some

## Privacy/personal data

- TikTok's main revenue source has been sale of personal data
- Little or no transparency about what data is being sold or to whom
- It amasses huge amounts of data on each users' interests and objective personal information, including biometric data, building detailed physical and psychological profiles (but note this also underpins the building of communities of interest)
- It appears to acquire key personal data items that users don't input themselves
- Possibility of nefarious use, e.g. doxxing, blackmail, abuse by corporations and governments, especially China
- Adverse digital footprints affecting young people's futures - desire to be famous distorts online behaviour, e.g. liking trending negative videos.
- Accurate targeting makes advertising insidious and effective (though this is seen as a personal benefit by some)

## Polarisation

- TikTok is inherently socially divisive - the other side of "communities of interest" is that they become echo chambers in the political arena
- The AI (algorithm) militates against exposure to multiple views
- Cancel culture is endemic
- Hate speech is facilitated
- Divergence between real life and digital personalities - people become more confrontational online without the social constraints of face-to-face interaction
- What draws people together on TikTok can drive them apart in the real world
- Sometimes used to test more extreme views

## **Disinformation and misinformation**

- Lack of content ratings, advisories and controls means both are rife
- Dissemination and repetition of opinions leads to perceptions of opinions as facts
- A lot of young people are relying on TikTok, even more than Google or Wikipedia, even though the information on it is even less reliable or verifiable
- Censorship and manipulation of content by Chinese-owned company a concern, e.g. the algorithm is opaque and could be biased politically

## **Extreme difficulty of regulating the platform**

- Sheer size and spread makes internal regulation by TikTok virtually impossible and/or they have no incentive to self-regulate
- Speed of development and complexity of issues mitigates against government action
- Tools for individual user self-regulation are weak

## Miscellaneous Points Raised

- Tiktok is the ultimate medium for generation and dissemination of fast-moving trends
- Trends develop very quickly and provide another force for connecting people
- Anybody's video can go viral but conversely the fame can be very short-lived
- The algorithm isn't all negative by any means, e.g. sometimes negative videos on a contentious topic will be followed by a positive, balancing one
- Perception depends on the viewer's mood and personality, so what might cause depression in one might be laughable to another
- Freedom of speech was recognised as a core value and a counter to some ideas about action to offset negative effects of TikTok
- Trade off between privacy and personalisation
- Tension between FOMO and awareness/resentment about wasting time on TikTok



## **Possible Solutions**

Many positive suggestions emerged from the discussions about how to mitigate or manage negative aspects of TikTok. The main emphasis was usually on actions students could take themselves, i.e. a healthy presumption of individual responsibility, rather than relying on others to solve their problems.

Having said that, good suggestions for further consideration or action by parents, schools, community agents and governments were also canvassed.

Overall there was an impressive awareness and articulation that it is not straightforward to work out what should be done, if anything, on a number of aspects of TikTok, especially by governments.

### **Individual and family responsibility**

- Use short periods on TikTok as reward for a period of school work
- Exercise some control over what content you are fed by searching on hashtags you are interested in
- Consciously avoid “going down rabbit holes” of content to keep your feed balanced
- Consider alternative means of entertainment and stress relief
- Save positive or educational videos to revert to, in order to offset negative ones, e.g. authoritative health sources to counter diet- and body image-obsessed TikToks.
- Delete and refrain from TikTok or even all social media entirely
- Parents need to engage and support, especially with younger users

## **School and community measures**

- Programs to educate young people about using social media generally and TikTok in particular
- Critical thinking courses
- Training and supporting young advocates on responsible use of social media

## **TikTok internal reforms**

- Better built-in watch time control tools
- Other tools to help users break the endless streams of content
- A less personalised 'For You' page
- Limit the number of videos users can view
- Tools to enable users to block content, or make methods to report or block content more efficient and memorable within the application's user interface
- Default the main page to be of a user's followed creators rather than the 'For You' page, where users have more control over what they view and follow
- More in depth content advisories or warnings as deployed by other platforms, especially on content that spreads misinformation

## **Government regulation**

Although governmental regulation was not a priority for most students in the discussion, most believe some is needed. The example of attempts to regulate Facebook has caused some students to believe that the 'IT Giants' are out of control and possibly uncontrollable. There was often a sense of disempowerment on the subject.

However, the following suggestions were made:

- Bring TikTok directly into the regulatory environment in Australia
- Tighten privacy and data security provisions
- Require ByteDance to be transparent and accountable for data use and security
- Introduce a content rating and warning system
- Ban it outright - as done in India and many other places
- Broader point - take the opportunity to address wider issues around social media, not just TikTok

## Next Steps

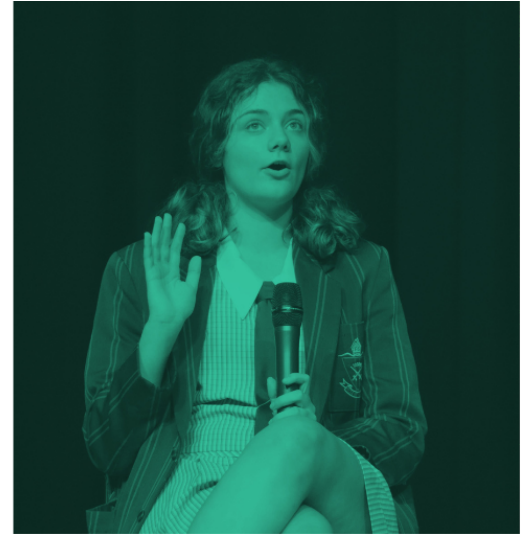
At the individual level, all those involved in the inaugural round are encouraged to share this report with family, friends and colleagues to facilitate further thought and discussion - the subject is important in itself on several levels, is complex and will require extended discussions for positive changes in behaviour and policy to emerge.

Several students and schools have indicated they are considering the establishment of dialogue clubs, which The Brisbane Dialogues would like to support in every way possible.

In the political sphere, this report is being presented to the Speaker of the Queensland Parliament and advice is being sought as to how best to disseminate it to other members of that House, including ministers. A similar process is being considered for the Parliament of Australia (noting that the current and preceding Speakers are also from Queensland).

Students are encouraged to use the report to contact and make representations to politicians at all levels of government - not only because the subject is important in itself, but as an exercise in civic and political engagement which is vital to the health of the nation.

In the end, the “voice of youth” has to come from young people themselves.



## Credits

With gratitude and congratulations to all involved in the inaugural round of Dialogues @ School, with apologies to anyone omitted:

## Students

Aditya G, Alex M, Allie Q, Amelia BW, Amity L, Amy S, Andrew P, Anmol K, Anna L, Annette C, Astrid M, Bailee G, Baran E, Barnaby S, Bella VK, Ben R, Benjamin W, Cate D, Charlotte X, Deeya S, Elizabeth J, Elizabeth M, Ella H, Elliot W, Erin W, Ethan C, George L, Georgia McD, Grace Q, Hannah B, Hayden G, Holly M, Hugo H, Hugo W, Imogen E, Isaac D, Isabella M, James K, Jessica CM, Jessica S, Kate B, Kitani V, Lily C, Linh T, Madeline E, Matthew B, Megan C, Noah D, Nicholas ML, Oscar S, Pemay J, Rachel H, Ria M, Rosa D, Sonya S, Sophia P, Sunny T, Tamara L, Thomas B, Wesley H, Zoe M





## **School Staff**

Adrian Cajes, Alice Elwell, Dylan Morris, Emma Velthuis, Grant Smith, Karen Farrow, Kate Wiedemann, Kath Kayrooz, Kaylene Hennessy-Rasmussen, Lucy Andre, Maxi Taylor, Melissa Ellis, Nina Johnson, Paul Browning, Paul Hunter, Paul Sterling, Rachel Bowhay, Rebecca Jones, Rebecca Skarszewski, Rob Hamilton, Samantha Jensen, Sebastian Percival, Sharon Roberts, Tim Kotzur, Ula George, Ysabella Chambers Dawson

## **Moderators**

Bill Tweddell, David Fagan, Dylan Parker, Gigi Foster, Graham Young, Helen Chenery, Ian Walker, Peter Ellerton, Sarah Percy, Shahar Hameiri, Simon Bowler, Theodora Le Souquet, Tyson Etri

## **Brisbane Dialogues Volunteers, Advisers and Supporters**

Alison Quinn, Ben Scott, Ella Trounce, Ethan Choe, Gabrielle Burey, Hon John Mickel, Lila Clarke, Mac Stewart, Peter Ellerton, Sam Weir, Sophie Young, Tyson Etri

# Appendices

## Program Brochure

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1X07v5Ne9RXjVkJG9ZJF9tnBhAPYfd-rZF>



## Further Information on Tiktok

This is a tiny portion of possible reading, selected to provide a window into political/economic and psychological/social dimensions respectively.

- *The all-conquering quaver*, The Economist, 9 Jul 22  
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1naAJlyzGOIO4WIFrRtjLjKOgjoUwI2Li>
- *TikTok Brain Explained: Why Some Kids Seem Hooked on Social Video Feeds*, The Wall Street Journal, 5 Apr 22  
[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-NZzrU1JpJpmbfX456jm68WVbp-zYD\\_h](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-NZzrU1JpJpmbfX456jm68WVbp-zYD_h)

This film is more about Google and Facebook, but is highly relevant to the rise and impact of TikTok:

- “The Social Dilemma”, Netflix documentary-drama, 2020,  
<https://www.netflix.com/au/title/81254224>





[Page intentionally left blank]

## Follow us



@brisbanedialogues



@brisbanedialogues



@brisbanedialogues



Brisbane Dialogues



@BNEdialogues



The Brisbane Dialogues



[brisbanedialogues.org](https://brisbanedialogues.org)