EMARKETER

The Daily: What a TikTok ban could do to social search and how AI-powered chatbots are changing how we look for things

Audio

On today's podcast episode, we discuss how much people are actually searching on social media platforms versus looking elsewhere, what a TikTok ban could do to social search, and how AI-powered chatbots are changing how we look for things. Tune in to the discussion with our analyst Evelyn Mitchell-Wolf.

Subscribe to the "Behind the Numbers" podcast on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Pandora, *Stitcher,* YouTube, *Podbean or wherever you listen to podcasts.* Follow us on Instagram

Episode Transcript:

Marcus Johnson (00:00):

This episode is made possible by Roundel. Partner with Roundel and reach the over 165 million guests who look to Target for joy and inspiration. Together with you, they'll design curated media solutions that are a seamless extension of the target experience, and that is all

backed by unparalleled first-party data and measurements. If you would like to learn more, you can do so @roundel.com.

Evelyn Mitchell-Wolf (00:28):

It's not like consumers will stop searching on social platforms the way they've grown accustomed to doing the time consumers spend on TikTok will likely shift to a few other platforms. YouTube and Instagram would be the two biggest beneficiaries of such a shift.

Marcus Johnson (00:50):

Hey gang, it's Thursday, June 13th, Evelyn and listeners, welcome to the Behind The Numbers Daily, an eMarket podcast made possible by Roundel. I'm Marcus. Today I'm joined by one of our senior analysts who covers everything digital advertising and media, based in Virginia. It's Evelyn Mitchell-Wolf.

Evelyn Mitchell-Wolf (01:08):

Hi Marcus. Hello everybody.

Marcus Johnson (01:10):

Hello there. Today we're talking about searching on social media, but we start of course, with today's fact, the wettest country in the world is, and don't you dare say England. Vicious stereotype.

Evelyn Mitchell-Wolf (01:23):

Guess are you asking me to guess? Oh, okay. Something in the Nordics.

Marcus Johnson (01:28):

Why are you squinting? Are you looking at what are you trying to, no,

Evelyn Mitchell-Wolf (01:31):

This is my like is guessing face. My brows are furrowed. I'm thinking, Marcus,

Marcus Johnson (01:39):

What's your guess? Sorry, I wasn't paying any

Evelyn Mitchell-Wolf (01:41):

attention. Somewhere in the Nordics. I don't know...

Marcus Johnson (01:43):

Columbia.

Evelyn Mitchell-Wolf (01:44):

Oh, I never would've guessed that.

Marcus Johnson (01:46):

Interesting. Tops. The list with the highest average precipitation at 3,200 millimeters in a year is 130 inches. Wow. Its Tutendo district is one of the world's wettest places. It's nearly four times wetter than the country's average and the country's number one. Wow. So 130 inches of rain for Columbia for context, that's four times wetter, more rain than America averages. Overall, the driest country in the world is Evelyn's like, Nordics?

Evelyn Mitchell-Wolf (02:18):

I'm panicking. Saudi Arabia was my guess.

Marcus Johnson (02:21):

Egypt just 18 millimeters, which is less than an inch, which would make it 200 times drier than Columbia. And Egypt is such a dry country that... The second driest country is Libya and Egypt is three times drier than that.

Evelyn Mitchell-Wolf (02:40):

Holy cow.

Marcus Johnson (02:41):

Yeah, so it's not, yeah. Anyway, say it's real topic. Searching for things on social media in today's episode. First in the lead, we will cover social search, knowing other news today. So let's start, Evelyn by just looking at how folks are searching on social media, how many folks are doing it? Because we've heard talk about people using social media platforms, more people gravitating towards those platforms when they want to search for things. But what does the data say about how many or how much folks are actually searching for things on social media platforms?

Evelyn Mitchell-Wolf (03:21):

Generally, the data says it's very common, especially among younger generations. But first I'll hit you with some stats for the general US adult population. So according to Isaiah, 48% of social media users are likely or very likely to do product research on a social platform before making a purchase. So that is product research and not social search more broadly, like searching for a piece of content they saw. That's a pretty common use case as well, but hopefully for advertisers sake, knowing how much product research is going on is more along the lines of what they're looking to understand. So if you include those who are somewhat likely to be engaging in social search, it goes up to 67%. So two thirds of social media users consider themselves at least somewhat likely to engage in social search for product research. And according to a recent Forbes advisor survey, 24% of Americans say they only use or primarily use social media to search online for certain topics like restaurants, fashion and sports. That's huge and it is. So there could definitely be a perception bias at play here, but it tells us two things. First, consumers are engaging in social search enough that they have noticed a shift in their own search behaviors, and second brands have an opportunity to meet their audiences where they're searching, where they're demonstrating purchase intent. And that's increasingly social networks as much as it is Google.

Marcus Johnson (04:56):

Yeah, that last point I want to talk about for a second, because when you look at it, you break it down by platform. Jungle Scout has some research on this. This is from September of last year. Most folks will of course start shopping searches on Amazon, unsurprisingly 51%, but then it's a search engine, Google 39, then Walmart 34, the largest retailer. So that makes sense. But then 10 points behind that with around 15 to 20% come to social networks, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and social platforms are as popular go-tos as some of the larger retailers. The share of people who start their shopping search on Target 16% is the same share as those who start a shopping search on TikTok. So there's some pretty significant numbers, even if they aren't as high as Amazon or Google quite yet.

Evelyn Mitchell-Wolf (05:45):

Yeah. Well, I was going to say, one of the things also that social platforms do that Amazon and other retailers don't do is they capture some of that more upper funnel audiences that aren't necessarily sure that they're in market for a particular product or they want to buy a particular brand. That retailers do capture a lot of that intent. But social platforms are kind of expanding

the search funnel to include a lot more upper funnel activity, just some general interest or more topic or special interest oriented kind of consumer purchase intent where they might not have already decided they want to buy something, but they are building brand affinities, building brand awareness.

Marcus Johnson (06:26):

You mentioned 24% of folks primarily using social media for searches according to Forbes advisor, but less Zoom in on the young people for a second. How are they searching for things differently than older ones?

Evelyn Mitchell-Wolf (06:38):

Yeah, you had 24% of the entire respondent pool there. Preferred social networks to traditional search engines like Google for certain topics, and that share goes up to 35% for millennials. So that's quite a jump. And then 46% for Gen Z. So pretty significant shifts there, and you can see that the younger consumers are really the ones trendsetting here. I do want to note that just for reference, you cited that Jungle Scout research, this Forbes advisor survey also classifies YouTube as social media or includes YouTube among certain other social platforms in social search research. And while YouTube does have many qualities that a social network has, and I certainly consider it an alternative to Google, some listeners might not view it as a true social search player. So just wanted to mention that so folks can take it for what it's worth.

Marcus Johnson (07:32):

Yeah, that's a good point. The number that jumped out to me when looking at younger folks and how they're searching differently than older folks. GWI says there's a 20 point gap between adults who use search engines versus social media search engines being higher. So 20 point gap for adults overall between those who use search engines versus social media to search for things for younger gen Zs. The gap's just 10 points, which is a lot, lot closer. Obviously one of the platforms we mentioned where folks are turning to search for things and in particular starting their shopping searches is TikTok. We mentioned 16% of people, same number, same share of people who are starting on target searching things on TikTok, but TikTok of course is up against battling against a new law that says it has until early next year to sell its US business or face a ban in America. So Evelyn, what were a TikTok ban do to social search?

Evelyn Mitchell-Wolf (08:28):

Honestly, a TikTok ban would mean just about the same thing for social search as it means for social video or social media more broadly. TikTok was sort of the pacesetter for social search as a trend. It was the most influential player that helped younger generations develop a really hardy appetite for infotainment and user generated content. As we know, like I just mentioned, younger generations are the trendsetters. So when the youngins do something, it's certainly worth watching. Then TikTok noticed consumers were using it as a search engine a few years ago and really leaned in. It introduced new elements in its user interface to reinforce those search habits. It also rolled out a new payment structure called the Creator Rewards program that factors in how well content aligns with search trends, thus incentivizing creators to optimize content for organic social search. So it's been doing everything it can to bolster its position as Gen Z's preferred search destination, and it also launched search ads for advertisers that want to take advantage of that.

Evelyn Mitchell-Wolf (09:35):

So I don't want to downplay what TikTok has done for social search, but now the social search habit is fairly entrenched. So if TikTok is no longer an option, it's not like consumers will stop searching on social platforms. The way they've grown accustomed to doing the time consumers spend on TikTok will likely shift to a few other platforms. YouTube and Instagram would be the two biggest beneficiaries of such a shift. And when it comes specifically to search YouTube, which already has a world-class search infrastructure thanks to its relationship with Google, may be better suited to capitalize on the influx of traffic and search activity. But Instagram has an interesting hand with meta AI being embedded into the search bar across its family of apps. So

Marcus Johnson (10:23):

Folks, yeah, those TikTok people might also migrate to YouTube because of the video, the huge video component that YouTube has helping make. I mean, tiktoks helped make video more of a priority for searches. You had some data in your recent research on this. Nearly 40% of Gen Z's starting product searches on YouTube or TikTok much higher than the overall US adult population. You point out is from February Jungle Scout, again, Evelyn another social platform who's trying to reinvent how people search for things is SNAP or Snapchat. A little over a year ago, SNAP released its gen AI powered chat bot called My AI initially to its paid Snapchat plus subscribers before expanding access to all users worldwide a few months later.

How are AI powered chatbots like this one changing how folks search for things on social media?

Evelyn Mitchell-Wolf (11:18):

It's a great question, and right now I don't have Roger myself. I don't have any data backed insights to share yet because in the social space, it's actually meta AI that's kind of the 800 pound gorilla. Snapchat's my ai, like you mentioned, it's been in the market for over a year. Its user base is just so much smaller than meta's. Chances are pretty high that meta AI will quickly become more widely used than my ai, especially considering, like I mentioned, meta AI is prominent placement in the ui. It is embedded directly into the search bar that are already used to engaging with it is so easy to end up in a meta AI chat. I've accidentally chatted with Meta AI a couple of times. I would argue that's not a great user experience accidentally. Yes, I was using the search bar to search for a piece of content that I'd run across and I was trying to show a friend and I must have accidentally clicked ask meta AI or something that in the user interface.

Evelyn Mitchell-Wolf (12:18):

And I ended up going to my chat with meta ai, which I had opened up just to test a few things. What we do here, we do research hands-on research, and I was frustrated because I was like, I didn't want this. I didn't ask for this. This just happened to me. And that is a reaction that I've seen from other users as well as a source of frustration. And although that can certainly be annoying, it's also very clear that Meta AI offers the path of least resistance to an AI powered chatbot. And by enriching the search experience on its platforms meta like TikTok is reinforcing consumer's use of social networks as search engines. And my AI is a little bit less like that because the content experience isn't quite the same as it is on something like Instagram where users would theoretically use the search bar to search for content.

Evelyn Mitchell-Wolf (13:04):

They're already used to using the search bar for other reasons. And my AI is kind of a separate experience in and of itself. So the UI difference I think is sort of weighted in meta AI's favor in terms of adoption and potential sort of shaping implications for consumer behavior and social search. And as for what comes next, obviously monetization is on the roadmap for meta AI in Meta's latest earnings call Zuckerberg was pretty clear that the plan is to scale the product before monetizing it, so it'll take time, but the ads are definitely coming. And

Snapchat has included sponsored links in my AI via a partnership with Microsoft for quite a while now, and Microsoft has reported that advertisers saw increased mobile traffic during initial tests. So that's a positive sign. But then again, meta may choose to display ads a little differently and with an older core audience than Snapchat users of Instagram and other meta properties may interact with those ads differently. So there's a lot of track in this space, and learnings from my AI may not necessarily be applicable to what happens with meta AI in the future.

Marcus Johnson (14:12):

They have to tread carefully here because there's still a lot of reassuring and learning to do when it came to the use of Gen AI and social media close to 70% were concerned about privacy issues and 60% were confused about how to interact with it as according to Big Village Survey from the last year. Yeah, and you're right, meta is really best positioned to capitalize this on this part in part because of their huge audience. I mean, a lot of folks have used Snap's, gen, AI, chatbot, my AI over 150 million people according to the company that said, a drop in the ocean compared to the number of people who Messa can get to use it just by placing it in the search bar. Let's end with some lessons here, Evelyn, for marketers when it comes to social search.

Evelyn Mitchell-Wolf (15:02):

Cool. Well, I guess I'll provide a takeaway for each of the sort of lines of inquiry we went through today, Marcus. So the first one, marketers whose target audiences lurk on social platforms like many of us do. They should test any paid search offerings that those platforms offer. Putting ad budgets behind high performing organic content that it's optimized for search can help reach consumers, especially if they're on the younger side where those consumers are most receptive. And that's always been the major value proposition for search and Google is not the only place where purchase intent is demonstrated or where product discovery occurs. Second, we talked about the potential TikTok ban. So the takeaway there is don't focus solely on one platform here. Explore social search opportunities across social apps to see where the results are most impactful for your business, because it will vary depending on your target audience.

Evelyn Mitchell-Wolf (16:01):

And diversifying social search strategies will also help mitigate disruption if a TikTok ban ever materializes. Sort of a two birds, one stone situation there. Third, and finally, talking about AI and AI powered chatbots in social search. The takeaway is just to keep your eye on meta ai. If consumers react favorably or learn how to interact with it with less confusion, social search habits could become further entrenched and then new monetization surfaces will likely open up down the road. So that'll take some time. But for any future focused marketers out there, that is where the puck is moving.

Marcus Johnson (16:40):

Some great takeaways. If you want all of the research that Evelyn wrote about social search, the full report is called Social Search Trends 2024 TikTok LED Phenomenon Makes Search for Funnel. We'll throw a link in the show notes so you can head to emarketer.com if you're a Pro plus subscriber. That's all we have time for today. Thanks to Evelyn for hanging out.

Evelyn Mitchell-Wolf (17:02):

Thank you, Marcus. This was a fun one.

Marcus Johnson (17:03):

Yes, indeed. What do you mean? This was a fun one.

Evelyn Mitchell-Wolf (17:06):

I love saying that because you always say, I know how you're going to respond every

Marcus Johnson (17:09):

Time. What do you mean? I always say, ah, let's end the show. Thank you for being here. Thanks to Victoria who edit the show, Stuart who runs the team, and Sophie does our social media. Thanks to everyone for listening in. We hope to see you tomorrow for the Behind The Numbers Weekly. Listen, that is of course eMarketer Video podcast. If you go to YouTube Made Possible by Roundel or it's regular audio everywhere else. Okay, don't worry, you'll find us.