DISINFORMATION ON TIKTOK: RESEARCH AND CONTENT MODERATION POLICIES

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Hi there! Let's knock on TikTok's door today and take a tour inside this platform to learn how it operates and how it can be employed for mis/disinformative purposes.

This factsheet is designed to empower the community engaged in countering disinformation on TikTok, and it will be updated as we learn more about this platform and some of its unattainable nooks and crannies.

INTRODUCTION

TikTok was founded by the Chinese company ByteDance in 2016 under the name of 'Douyin'. The international version, already called TikTok, was launched a year later and became fully available worldwide in 2018, after merging with the Chinese social media service, Musical.ly.

Originally focusing on short-form videos, particularly lip-syncing and dancing content, TikTok expanded into a comprehensive video-sharing platform catering to a diverse range of audiences and content creators around the world. The short video features by TikTok set a new trend in the social media landscape, as this highly engaging format was incorporated by most platforms following TikTok's success. So far, TikTok is generating significantly higher engagement rates in this category compared to Instagram and YouTube.

In just a few years, TikTok's growth has been stellar and its popularity rose exponentially during the pandemic lockdown. Although the platform keeps many of its user metrics private, it is estimated that the app has been downloaded over 3.5 billion times since it was launched. In 2022, TikTok counted approximately 1.7 billion users across 160 countries. As of October 2023, US is the country with the largest TikTok audience by far, with over 143 million users, followed by Indonesia with around 106 million users while Brazil came in third (95 million users).

Being a very large online platform (VLOP), TikTok is bound to additional transparency reporting requirements under Articles 15, 24, and 42 of the European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA). In view of this, the platform publishes a transparency report every six months where we got to know, inter alia, that the platform had on average 134 million 'monthly active' users in the European Union member states between February to July 2023.

On the other hand, the app is facing increasing limits and bans on a global scale: it is prohibited in India and blocked in devices from the EU's main institutions, to mention a few.

Given its magnitude and growth potential, TikTok plays an important role in the spread of information and, unfortunately, disinformation, especially among teenagers. TikTok is especially favored by them although it is no longer just an app for teens.

PLATFORM ORGANISATION

TikTok's structure revolves around four pillars of crucial understanding to prevent or debunk the mis/disinformation that could eventually emanate from them:

1. User Accounts:

- An account on TikTok is an individual's personal space within the platform.

- Each user has their own URL.

- The user downloads the app on a mobile device and creates a profile linked to a URL (www.tiktok.com/@username). They may add a picture and a bio. The account can be public or private. Option to filter comments is available.

- Users follow other users rather than establishing reciprocal friendships.

- TikTok offers switching to a TikTok Pro account to access analytics and insights.

2. Content Creation

- The primary content on TikTok consists of short-form videos.

- Content creators have at their disposal video editing tools, special effects and transitions, augmented reality (AR) filters, stickers and text overlays.

- A Music Library is made available for users to incorporate in their videos.

- It is possible to write a caption and use hashtags to complement the videos.

- 'Trends' and 'Challenges' play a significant role in content's creation, including collaborations and interactions with other users by dueting or stitching videos.

- A feature called 'Create Series' is a premium content behind a paywall. Series can include up to 80 videos ranging from 30 seconds to 20 minutes long.

3. Content itinerary:

- The platform is designed for content discovery pushing users to the 'For You' feed (FYF), the central space where they encounter a selection of videos focus on algorithmic curation, on preferences, engagement history, trending content...

- Following Tab is the content that users can see from the accounts they follow.

- Discover Page helps searching for specific users, hashtags, explore trends, etc.

4. Interactions and Engagement:

- TikTok encourages interactions through features such as likes, emojis, comments and shares. Direct Messages are also possible.

- It is possible for users to interact with the audience in real-time through TikTok Now or TikTok Live. Live chat is available, and viewers can send gifts and comments during live sessions.

WHAT ELSE CAN BE DONE AND FOUND ON TIKTOK?

Advertising:

- TikTok for Business is a specific advertising and marketing space on TikTok.

- TikTok ads are to be designed either by content creators or by brands.

- Ads appear in users' 'For You Feed' as they scroll through content. Furthermore, through TikTok Pulse, a contextual advertising solution, advertisers place their brand next to the top content in the 'For You Feed'.

- Ads might be linked to challenges and users are encouraged to participate using a specific hashtag (Branded Hashtag Challenges).

- E-commerce integration features allow users to shop directly through the platform (TikTok Shop)

- Advertisers can create custom branded effects and filters for users to include in their videos (Branded Effects).

- TikTok Ads Manager is the platform from which to manage an ad campaign.

- Targeting options to reach specific audiences are available.

- Advertisers bid for ad space on TikTok (Ad Auction System).

- TikTok has a Creative Center where they offer creative expert courses, some related on how top performing ads.

- TikTok Creator Marketplace is the official platform where brands and creators (influencers, brand ambassadors) collaborate on ad campaigns.

- TikTok Ads Library provides a publicly accessible repository of all ads that are currently active or have been active in order to promote transparency and accountability in advertising. It provides a segmentation summary (gender, age, audience, location, interactions, unique users who have seen it, who is behind the ad, etc.). This tool is used by researchers to detect political advertising (banned on TikTok) and other containing false claims.

- To address concerns from ad targeting and data collection practices, the platform has a specific information page where to find TikTok measures on that regard.

Monetisation features (beyond advertising)[1]

- **Host a LIVE.** Creators can get Tips, Gifts or collect Diamonds that can turn into money.
- **Create SERIES.** Eligible creators a collection of premium content behind a paywall.
- **Create VIDEOS.** If Video Gift is turned on, viewers may send Diamonds or Tips.
- **Creativity Program Beta.** It allows users to collect rewards by creating and publishing longer video content.
- **TikTok Creator Fund.** Program designed to financially support users for creating outstanding content.[2]

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1   TikTok's monetization features may vary by region, and eligibility requirements may change over time.
2   This feature will eventually be shut down.

- **TikTok Creator Next.** Hub where money-making tools are together (Creator Fund, Creator MarketPlace, Video Gifts, LIVE Gifts, Tips).
- **TikTok Effect House.** It is possible to get financial rewards for creating TikTok effects.
- **TikTok Shop.** This feature allows to shop directly from a LIVE by tapping the pinned products, shopping directly from a shoppable video by tapping the product link or directly from a brand or creator account.[3]
- **Donation sticker.** It is added in the profile together with the name of the organisation receiving donations.

Tools and components for content creation, interaction, viewing comfort and security:

- **Lights, Camera, Action** allows linking movies and TV shows to videos.
- **Text-to-Speech** allows the user to change the voice in the recorded video.
- **Text-to-Singing Voice Effect** allows turning any text into a song.
- **Customized TikTok Stickers** allows users to design and upload their own stickers.
- **In-app Verification**, a verification badge proves that an account is authentic.
- **TikTok TV** allows watching content from the 'For You' and Following feeds on the TV.
- **Effect House**, where the use of AI is encouraged to develop AR effects for TikTok.
- **TikTok Collections** is a feature to organise and curate videos added in 'Favorites'.
- **Playlists** allow users to organise their videos into categorised sets. Other users can find the Playlists on the profile page.
- **TikTok Now** allows sharing authentic real-time images or 10-second videos at the same time as other friends.
- **Photo slideshow** allows making collages or videos out of photos.
- **TikTok Stories** allow users to create shorter content that disappears after 24 hours.

*TikTok promotes products owned by its parent company (ByteDance) such as CapCut *

FLASH FACTS & STATS

- Self-created videos can be up to three minutes; Uploaded videos up to ten minutes long.
- TikTok ads/commercials range from from five to 60 seconds.
- Three accounts on one device are allowed at most.
- Minimum age to join the platform is 13 years.
- Minimum age to send or receive direct messages is 16 years.
- 200 TikTok accounts can be followed per day, at most.

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3   The In-App spending is huge according to this article

- 15 accounts can be followed per session opened, at most.
  If "following too fast", TikTok may disable a user's account for 24 hours.
- 10k is the maximum number of accounts that a single user can follow.
  It's recommended to avoid reaching this limit to avoid 'shadowbans'.
- 500 likes are the maximum 'video-likes' a TikToker can give per day.
  If "tapping too fast", TikTok may disable a user's account for 24 hours.
- Up to 2.200 characters are available to write a video caption/description.
- TikTok's account name can be changed only once a month.
- 80 characters are available to write the account bio.

INVESTIGATIONS TO TRACE DISINFORMATION ON THE PLATFORM

There is a crucial need for specialised approaches to study and combat disinformation on TikTok. We offer here a number of tools to search effectively on this platform:

Search features

- TikTok offers a search function named Discover (some users will see the Friends Tab in its place), enabling users to find content based on keywords. This search box helps to search for users, videos, sounds, LIVEs, and hashtags.

- According to TikTok, the platform considers several factors when returning search results based on user preferences and interactions. Therefore, search results may vary from one user to another.

- One of the significant drawbacks of the TikTok app is its limited ability to filter search results.

- TikTok has restricted its Creative Center tool, previously used by critics to scrutinise content related to geopolitics and the Israel-Hamas war. The tool allowed users to track popular hashtags, but the search function and links for certain hashtags have stopped working, and data related to politically sensitive topics seems to have disappeared.

Application Programming Interface (API)

- The TikTok API has been made available to non-profit academic researchers in Europe since last July, ahead of EU rules requiring Big Tech to do more to police online content. It is necessary to obtain an access token on the TikTok Developer Platform.

- This tool gives access to a wide range of data on TikTok across three main areas encompassing user accounts, content, and keyword search results. These include data on user profiles, comments, captions, and performance data such as shares, on topics related to consumer trends, misinformation, mental health, etc. TikTok API limits the requests that can be sent in a given timeframe. According to this study, the research API falls woefully short.

- TikTok does not provide API access to civil society organisations. They are not therefore able to collect quantitative and qualitative data at scale or evaluate whether the platform is enforcing its rules. Civil society researchers need to opt for data donation to pursue their objectives.

- Unofficial API: These kinds of tools are not maintained (or allowed) by TikTok but have instead been reverse-engineered (the endpoints are meant to be used by the TikTok app). Although a bit unsteady, they can become a very powerful tool for researchers.

Data scraping

- Data scraping is commonly referred to automated processes to extract available data from the platform through web crawler or scripts. This data would include information about TikTok users' public profiles such as name, bio, age, gender, interests or user locations. It is possible to also gather data about user's likes, comments, shares, and views of videos, hashtags, etc.

- TikTok has implemented anti-scraping measures so researching through this process would

be unauthorised and against its Terms of Service. Additionally, it raises important ethical considerations regarding privacy (for instance, for content that users have not made public or consented to be collected) or legal considerations (e.g., copyright laws, intellectual property rights, and data protection laws).

- To efficiently scrape data from TikTok or other online sources, researchers and data analysts rely on third-party tools or software. These tools can streamline the data collection process and allow users to extract, organise and analyse the data more effectively.

Data scraping and API are an important way to hold TikTok accountable and produce solid data-based work further observation. Here is a list of tools researchers are currently using.

TikTok's Commercial Content Library

- To comply with DSA rules on transparency on paid advertising, TikTok opened up its database with information about paid ads and ad metadata.

- The Commercial Content Library is a repository of ads and other types of commercial content posted on TikTok. There are two main sub-libraries within it:

  - **TikTok Commercial content** promoting a brand, product or service which we're not paid to display. TikTok does not allow data to be exported for analysis.

  - **Ad Library** features ads that we're paid to display to users. For transparency purposes, it includes information of those that are active or currently inactive or that have been paused by the advertisers. It includes filtering features that enable searches based on country, ad category, etc.

Other tools

Cross-platform searches: Sharing content across platforms is easy on TikTok – a feature that is used for the dissemination of false information, but also becomes particularly valuable to trace disinformation. It may happen that a malicious TikTok creator has removed one of its videos from the platform. If that video was previously downloaded by another user and posted on a different social media, we could eventually find out who is behind the original video as often the name of the person who created the video is not deleted.

- These tips from Bellingcat are of great help when running an engine search:
  - To search for specific content or phrases type on Google site:http://tiktok.com intext: (add keyword here);
  - To search for specific words that appear on the songs type on Google site:tiktok.com/music inurl: (add keyword here).
  - To search for users: if you already know what type of username someone normally uses, but you don't know whether they changed this usual username a little bit, type on Google: inurl:https://m.tiktok.com/h5/share/usr filetype:html (add suspected user name)
  - Hashtag searches simply add that hashtag at the end of the following URL: www.tiktok.com/tag/put_any_hashtag_here

- **Archiving:** If looking for something that is already gone on TikTok it is always advisable checking if it was archived ([Wayback Machine](#)).

- **Extracting:** Videos pose an additional challenge when researching disinformation. Watching them can be more complex and time-consuming. That's why researching on TikTok often requires a creative approach. Beyond the video content itself, external elements like titles, channels, and comments can contain critical information for analysis.

- To run an image reverse and extract text from images (TikTok already allows adding content made out of images) we recommend using the tool developed by [InVid's We Verify](#).

HOW TO FLAG CONTENT ON THE PLATFORM AND ITS ENFORCEMENT

HOW TO REPORT CONTENT

Reporting a problem

Multiple things can be reported on TikTok if violating their policies such as its Community Guidelines: comments, direct messages, hashtags, accounts, sounds, stickers, suggested searches and, of course, videos.

Once the content to be reported is located, go to the share icon (it looks like an arrow) usually located on the right side of the screen below the content and tap on "Report". A menu will appear, go to the "Report" option" where TikTok presents a list of reasons for reporting the content. The most appropriate option that aligns with the violation should be selected. Depending on the nature of the report, TikTok may ask for additional information or details. After providing the necessary details, the report can be submitted.

Reporting illegal content

As part of requirements under the Digital Services Act, TikTok has put in place a specific mechanism to enable reporting of suspected illegal content. The process is similar to the one indicated above, although it requests extra information such as providing details of the law that we think the content violates, the country where the illegal content comes from and clearly explaining why you think the content violates the law by providing supporting evidence. There are categories of illegal content: Sexual exploitation; Terrorist offences; Illegal hate speech; Content relating to violent or organised crime; Illegal privacy-related violations; Non-consensual sharing of private or intimate images; Illegal goods/services; Harassment or threats; Defamation Consumer-related offences; Information-related offences; Financial crime and National security-related offences.

While TikTok primarily enforces these rules through automated and human moderation, the platform can also use the reporting functions to alert about content they believe violates their policies. Content that is reported for being illegal will first be reviewed against their policies and removed globally if the content is found to violate TikTok's policies. If it does not, then a specialist team of moderators will assess the report and take action if the content is illegal, including, for example, by restricting access to the content in the country where the law has been broken.

Reporting clearly illegal content does not necessarily result in TikTok taking down the videos.

PLATFORM POLICIES AGAINST DISINFORMATION

- TikTok's Community Guidelines define what is allowed and prohibited on the platform. The guidelines are organised by topic area and has eight guiding Community Principles.

- The Community Guidelines have a number of Integrity and Authenticity policies under which misinformation is outlined. The platform does not allow "inaccurate, misleading, or false content that may cause significant harm to individuals or society, regardless of intention".

  - Significant harm includes severe forms of: Physical injury and illness, including death; Psychological trauma; Large-scale property damage; Societal harm, including undermining fundamental social processes or institutions, such as democratic elections, and processes that maintain public health and public safety

  - Conspiracy theories involve rejecting generally accepted explanations for events and suggesting they were carried out by covert or powerful groups.

- The platform does not allow:

  - Misinformation that poses a risk to public safety or may induce panic about a crisis event or emergency,

  - Medical misinformation, such as misleading statements about vaccines.

  - Climate change misinformation that undermines well-established scientific consensus.

  - Dangerous conspiracy theories that are violent or hateful or specific conspiracy theories that name and attack individual people.

  - Material that has been edited, spliced, or combined (such as video and audio) in a way that may mislead a person about real-world events

  - Paid political promotion, political advertising, or fundraising by politicians and political parties (for themselves or others). TikTok political ads policy includes both traditional paid ads and creators receiving compensation to support or oppose a candidate for office.

  - Synthetic or manipulated media that show realistic scenes are not allowed unless clearly disclosed.

  - Synthetic media that contains the likeness of any real private figure or synthetic media of public figures if the content is used for endorsements or violates any other policy.

  - Trade of services that attempt to artificially increase engagement or deceive TikTok's recommendation system.

  - Unoriginal Content and QR Code

  - Spam and Deceptive Account Behaviours.

TikTok encourages creators to label AI-generated content: "Our Community Guidelines require that AI-generated content depicting realistic scenes be clearly disclosed. And we encourage people to disclose any content that's been completely created or significantly edited by AI."

Another helpful resource is the TikTok Transparency Center and its section "combating disinformation", which explains how the platform connects their community to authoritative information, gives infor-

mation about their fact-checking program, how they counter influence operations and their process of labelling state affiliated media entities.

Certain topics led to the development of specific policies. EU DisinfoLab analysed TikTok policies around AI-related and manipulated, electoral, climate change, and health misinformation.

To comply with The Code of Practice on Disinformation the platform has committed to publish a transparency report every six months to provide granular data for EU/EEA countries about TikTok's efforts to combat online misinformation.

RELEVANT CASES ON HOW THE PLATFORM IS USED IN DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS

This final section is by no means exhaustive but simply wishes to convey with a few examples the extent of TikTok's use to deceive and mislead.

- (2023/2024) [Taiwan voters faced a flood of pro-China disinformation](#) ahead of the presidential election, from deepfakes to misleading TikTok videos.

- (2023) [A Russian propaganda campaign](#) involving thousands of fake accounts on TikTok spreading disinformation about the war in Ukraine was uncovered by a joint DFRLab - BBC Verify investigation. The campaign targeted former Ukrainian defense minister Oleksii Reznikov by accusing him of corruption

- (2023) [TikTok fails to enforce content removal of climate change-denial videos](#). A [BBC investigation](#) found hundreds of climate change-denying videos in English, Spanish, Turkish, Arabic, Portuguese and Russian, on TikTok.

- (2022) [Researchers at NewsGuard](#) searched for content about prominent topics on TikTok (climate change, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, abortion, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, etc.) and concluded that nearly 1 in 5 of the videos automatically suggested by the platform contained misinformation.

- (2022) [According to a study by Media Matters](#) a pro-Russia propaganda campaign used over 180 TikTok influencers to promote, in a coordinated way, the invasion of Ukraine by using the caption "Russian Lives Matter".

- (2022) An [investigation by Global Witness](#) revealed that TikTok (and also Facebook) failed to detect election disinformation in the US.

- (2021) [A Mozilla investigation](#) concluded TikTok's automated approach to labelling content about the German election with informational banners was not working effectively while also allowing TikTok's accounts impersonate prominent political figures.