

TikTok

What you need to know and why it should be deleted right now!



This is not a new app, having had a name change from Musical.ly to TikTok in 2018 when the existing Musical.ly and Live.ly company was purchased by the Chinese Internet giant ByteDance. TikTok called Douyin in China, already had a vast presence and this exploded with this amalgamation. The reported deal was in the realm of 1 billion dollars USD.

The actual purchase took place in 2017, but Musical.ly has migrated all users over to TikTok as of August 2nd 2018 at the time of the name change.

Musical.ly had a broad reach with over a 100 million active users per month – with fans calling themselves musers. Use of TikTok records figures of 500- 800 million monthly users now if not more. It is massive, and growing in popularity.

Musical.ly had had a number of problems for an app that had been marketed to pre-teens/children – despite making vague noises about a 13+ age gate. Some examples of these including children behaving pornographically in pursuit of likes, random strangers being able to contact young users, flagrant disregard of the age ratings (13+) , inappropriate language and dancing content from the videos provided to “lip synch “ to. The list was becoming longer as the app grew in popularity and with the sale – the perfect excuse for a rebrand arose.

And – one would have thought – a opportunity to fix some of the issues that had plagued TikTok’s predecessor.

Well. NO. That didn’t happen.

And so begins the lists of reasons why Safe on Social, really is not a fan.

TO START - Privacy of children

TikTok or Bytedance is currently the proud recipient of the largest EVER civil penalty in the USA for violating the online privacy of children.

Those words should be enough. India banned it (and now has a special set of guidelines for users). Indonesia banned it, and now the USA has given it a kick in the proverbial.

But what did the app do, particularly in America to earn this reward?

In the USA, there is a piece of legislation called COPPA or the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act 1998. Part of this legislation is the requirement that companies that intend to collect personal information MUST obtain parental consent for individuals under 13.

Prior to rebranding Musical.ly had been aware that a large proportion of its users were under 13 as they had received thousands of complaints from parents.

The company had done nothing to address this issue either as Musical.ly or TikTok.

What was found during the Federal investigation was that information that was being captured by the app consisted of email addresses, phone numbers, first and last names and personal photographs of children well under the age of thirteen. (and facial recognition technology is used within the filters available - as an aside)

Trying to hide behind re-iterating the fact it had always had an "age-gate" especially since the rebrand was a futile exercise in the eyes of the court – given the ease with which it is to lie in these birthdate entry points.

With its open messaging structure, automatic public defaults of profile pages, and huge levels of underage content that was leading to adults trying to contact children via the app, it was too much for the court.

“The operators of Musical.ly — now known as TikTok — knew many children were using the app but they still failed to seek parental consent before collecting names, email addresses, and other personal information from users under the age of 13,” FTC Chairman Joe Simons stated in a press release. The FTC said the \$5.7 million settlement is the largest civil penalty ever in a children’s privacy case.”

Bytedance /TikTok was ordered to delete all data stored on users under 13 at the request of their parents and they will also be paying an \$8 million fine.

This has prompted the company to begin to develop an under 13 only space – but.....really? How genuine is this intent to keep younger users safe?.....Not very genuine at all.

Safe on Social feels the following account is telling. And not in a good way.

Directly after the COPPA case ruling this February 2019 the following took place.

A whole bunch of users found themselves locked out of their TikTok accounts following the age ruling. The Federal Trade Commission ruling saw TikTok temporarily suspend all accounts belonging to individuals under 13.

(So if you don't remember your pre-teen bewailing the loss of their TikTok/Musical.ly account around February 2019– your child may be lying about their birthdate on the app).

These same users took to Twitter to complain. And this showed very, very clearly that many of the suspended under 13 years accounts belonged to ACTUAL ADULTS. (or at the least older teens).

Um...what?

Adults pretending to be children to interact with children on the internet?
Adults pretending to be children to interact with children online complaining about accounts being suspended and therefore outing themselves as creepy stalker types publicly?

There' s a special name for internet idiocy of that ilk, and we won't be putting it here. But come on! Even more special was TikTok's own response.

The app suggested that, well, if people had ...you know...accidently put in the wrong birthdate, they could tootle over to the Report a Problem section of the web browser. Right.

This is the point that you would hope, such users were completely booted and banned from the app – but nope. TikTok offered a polite way for them to continue.

And doubling down HARD on the whole issue of personal data security in the first place, the app continued to state that

"...app and provide confirmation that you're age 13 or older by submitting a copy of your government ID." Via Twitter

Stunning. Send us a copy of your FORMAL identification documents, to prove you are actually older than 13, because we have just been fined for improperly managing data already and need your information.

And even more no, because for those users who missed the obvious issue with sending an internet company, just charged with privacy breaches copies of formal ID – they started complaining that since their accounts were suspended they were locked out of the website too.

It was a mess. And this was only four months ago. And nothing has been mentioned about the MASSIVE problems that lot of adults were masquerading as pre-teens.

This can be summarised by saying that the app has...

No problems with adults pretending to be children, and no intent to sanction these users.

They just want more of your data.

Strike one.

MORE REASONS AND MORE PROBLEMS

If the deliberate collection of data from children wasn't enough for you to want to delete your child's account, here's some more fun filled facts from the UK.

The NSPCC or the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children recent released statistics that found that 25% of children they surveyed who used TikTok (and they looked at 40,000) had connected with a stranger on the app, and of these, one in 20 had been asked to strip or perform suggestively during those encounters.

Still think it's fine? Need more reasons to delete this? No problem. Here's some more.

More Problems Part two - Branching out

Where Musicall.ly was largely focused on lip synching videos – TikTok has splintered into numerous directions from its karaoke roots.

The app is full of 15 second clips covering – well a wide variety of genres – physical comedy, dancing, gymnastics, monologues, lip-synchs - with the common theme being some kind of audio track laid down over the clip. This can be a song or a voiceover. There are popular songs, voiceovers, filters, emoji's and comments, hashtags and likes and dislikes – similar to many social media applications.

But.

The content has gone a little wild west lately. The broadening from simple karaoke is leaving some toxic (and frankly astonishingly horrible) video up on the app.

I was going to add a link to a video here. A screen recording of 3mins of TikTok, but I decided against it as the language and content was just too much. If you would like to view it I have pinned it to the top of the Safe on Social Facebook page.

Watch without an account

You do not need a personal TikTok account to view the content of the app. You can download the app without becoming part of the community. Watch anything that rolls up on the app.

This means a child may view the public accounts of strangers doing absolutely anything on TikTok , without a parent having imposed any filters or restrictions on the app. You can't censor the content your child may be exposed to. You can't set anything. Your child can watch anything they want, without having an account.

NOTE – this is an option a number of children are taking, to avoid being restricted by parents. We have had this explained to us by students.

Inaccurate ages used both by older and younger usersThe age restrictions according a number of sources varies from 12+ to over 16+ -depending on which internet parenting forums you may seek advice from, but TikTok itself insists on a 13+ birthdate for members(now). And will create a sort of quarantine area “Kidzone” for the younger users. From the company directly...The company is launching a separate in-app experience for kids under 13 that will place *“extensive limitations on content and user interaction,” according to the statement. “In the younger ecosystem, users cannot do things like share their videos on TikTok, comment on others’ videos, message with users, or maintain a profile or followers,”* the statement reads. A child/anyone can choose Facebook, an email address and other social media accounts to sign in to TikTok. They are required to enter their date of birth. Should they do this honestly, they will not be allowed to make an account.

That’s it.

That’s the age-gate protecting children from signing up.

Of course, this is easily lied about and circumvented, and has been – if you merely look at the response seen on Twitter when TikTok was forced to crack down on younger users accounts. (see above).

Default Public setting for all accounts

An account, when established is automatically a public one. A child may not realise this when setting up their profile, or deliberately choose not to install the privacy options.

Anyone at all may view the content of a public account, and until the privacy function is switched on they continue to be able to do this. While there is a feature that can limit followers to only approved ones – when the essential point of an app is to collect likes and gain popularity – what child will really stick to this?

Private accounts on a sharing app

These are difficult to insist on and it is really impossible to expect a child to use this app in a privacy bubble. You are absolutely kidding yourself if you think your child’s private account will remain that way, unless they only use it when you are around, and your supervision is very strict. The app is not designed to be used this way. With this style of app there is huge incentive to engage in the wider TikTok community and gain popularity.

There are TikTok users with huge followings, and this can and does lead to children taking risks – such as talking to and following the suggestions of strangers to accelerate their popularity. And yes – use your imagination at what some children have been asked to do online. "Barnardo's has reported seeing children as young as eight using their services after being encouraged to engage in sexual activity online, with TikTok being one of the apps used to target children."

<https://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle-2-15039/tiktok-privacy-settings-everything-parents-need-to-know-about-the-video-app-1-4872619>

Restricting account to private will in turn restrict a user use of the app. Accounts don't stay private for long. No notifications if someone screenshots your stuff Unlike Snapchat, who will send a notification to a user if a screen shot has been taken, this does not happen with TikTok.

Should your account not be a private one, any one may screenshot your content, and the user will be none the wiser. Bad language and inappropriate content The music offered in the TikTok library is unrestricted unless specific settings are engaged.

Many popular tunes offered include words you really don't want a child using, or lip synching to, and many dance clips feature very sexually suggestive choreography. You can't control this – even if you install the restricted mode many things slip past, and TikTok has sort of covered itself by stating that content can include “mature or suggestive themes”. This of course, makes it just fine and yes, your child can still access uncensored lyrics and video content, should the account be public. Or as mentioned above – if they choose to just watch TikTok rather than participate.

No comments or video screening- to public accounts

There's no comment moderation. Anyone may comment on your child's video, or watch it. And it is not hard in the slightest, to veer off the more popular videos and find some unsavoury things you really, really don't want your child to see. Much of this style of content is inappropriate even for the 16+ recommendations TikTok advised, and would struggle to not acquire an X rating.

Hashtags

Hashtags are used to collate videos into types/styles or to follow trends. These are selected to add to a video when it is uploaded. There are numerous parental complaints arising about the specific hashtags trending on TikTok at various times and what actions these tags are linked to. Some have been seen encouraging self-harm – a form of cyberbullying of a serious nature, other encourage disordered eating, others inappropriate behaviour.

Contact with strangers

Due to the default public settings of the app there is a real risk that a stranger can contact, like, or follow online any new user they wish. There are volumes of reports online from parents complaining their child was contacted by adult users of the app. This is not a new danger on social media, but the structure of TikTok, the volume of activity and the struggles the app has endured with privacy concerns and child security make this more of a tangible threat on this app, as opposed to some of the other common social media platforms.

The above are the most obvious, almost expected problems you would see on a social media app – except for the whole data mining of children without parental consent part.

But there is another issue with Bytedance/TikTok that may not have crossed the minds of many. This addresses the topic of data security and privacy issues far past the point of the massive fine TikTok received for harvesting the data of its child users.

<https://qz.com/1613020/tiktok-might-be-a-chinese-cambridge-analytica-scale-privacy-threat/>

This company has already had a big foul attached to it re data mining. You still need an email, phone number of another social media account to sign up. The app does use your contacts both via phone, email and other social media contacts to find friends who already use the app. So yes, it's still collecting data – and your friends, data and their friends.

Why is there a problem with the way TikTok collects and stores its data on account holders?

Because this app, unlike the rest of the social media we are familiar with is Chinese owned. And the Chinese laws regarding data collection and storage are a very different animal to those that we see in the west. There is a different standard and indeed different expectation to privacy in China compared to Australia and many other nations. So, for TikTok a very pertinent question is where is all the data going? Well, according to TikTok's privacy policy, data collected prior to February 2019 was transferred to China.

The company itself has confirmed this in a series of emails, to the above articles author, David Carroll. *"Data from TikTok users who joined the service before February 2019 may have been processed in China. ByteDance has since reorganized its structure and operations to prevent user data from flowing into China."* This means, in essence that all the data collected from children illegally was stored in China, and as was everything else collected by the app prior to the lawsuit it lost in February 2019.

The article and the company attempt to discuss and navigate differing global privacy and data use restrictions. One rule for all does not apply, and while it a slightly complicated read, if you are concerned about what might happen to your information – maybe give it a look.

You should not be okay with this.

In addition, Facial recognition technology– the app uses a form of facial recognition technology to add effects to user's faces – sort of like a filter but not. Personal details combining with facial recognition combined is setting of numerous privacy sirens at Safe of Social.

The company recently acquired a global giant in Facial recognition technology aiming to refine this feature of the app. In February Bytedance acquired augmented reality selfie app Faceu for \$300 million USD.

Deleting TikTok Guess what?

It's a little dodgy regarding data security.

For a start, if you want to delete your child's account completely, you have to request a code that the app will send you through your smartphone, that if you hadn't already supplied while assisting your child to sign up – you must supply now.

A four-digit code will come through that must be entered before deletion can take place.

All content created will be lost at the point of deletion.

Follow the steps outlined via TikToks website to delete the account in its entirety.

Please feel free to share this article in your school newsletters - a link to www.safeonsocial.com would be appreciated.

For our paid subscribers a full cheat sheet including screenshots on how to delete the app will be in the toolkit by the end of the week. Details on how to become a paid subscriber are below.

Thanks and regards Kirra Pendergast CEO - Safe on Social Media Pty Ltd kirra@safeonsocial.com

Is your school a paid subscriber to our "Safe on Social Tool Kit"?

If so, you are eligible for a 10% discount on all of Professional Learning Courses including our NESAC Accredited 6hr course "What every teacher needs to know about social media and cyber safety" offered face to face and also via a three part webinar.

About The Safe on Social Toolkit

We have taken notice of the hundreds of questions asked weekly and developed an informative series of social media safety "cheat sheets" for all significant (and not so well known) apps and issues that may arise. Each cheat sheet is meticulously researched and presented with screenshots (when required) and clear descriptions of the steps to take when safeguarding your social media accounts. The content is practical, easy-to-read advice updated regularly ensuring the information you access remains current. We continuously add new cheat sheets, templates and other content to the toolkit.

Share with parents and students

We recommend that schools share information from our toolkit in the school newsletter and on the school website. You will be assisting parents in remaining current with fast-moving social media trends and issues. Teachers are encouraged to distribute relevant information to their students or use the material in the curriculum. By providing this valuable information in an easily accessible manner, the school can demonstrate to the school community the commitment it has to cyber safety and offer practical, helpful advice.

Support when you need it

As a part of your annual subscription we offer support via email should you require any advice throughout the year if issues arise.

COST:

\$395ex GST Annually (prorated and billed each February)

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