

TIKTOK

INTERACTIVE RESOURCE GUIDE



SAFER
SCHOOLS
TOGETHER



International Center for
Digital Threat Assessment



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This is an interactive document. Click the underlined links to read more or navigate to the correlating section of the document.

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INTRODUCTION

This Interactive Resource Guide and accompanying Micro Module will provide School Safety/Threat Assessment (SS/TA) Teams with a functional understanding of the TikTok platform and its utility in online data collection.

To make this training most effective, we encourage SS/TA Teams to download the TikTok application and follow along. In line with the recommendations provided in our [Digital Threat Assessment® training](#), we suggest that your SS/TA Team create a TikTok account for data collection. [Safer Schools Together \(SST\)](#) recommends against using personal accounts when searching as there is a possibility that the searching methods demonstrated may notify the Subject(s) of Concern (SOC).

HOW TO USE TIKTOK

TikTok is a video-sharing social networking platform where users make short videos that are typically set to popular songs. The TikTok app (application) has been downloaded over 4 billion times¹ and has 1.5 billion global users per month. Of those users, 170 million are from the United States.²

TikTok allows users to watch, record, and share a variety of short-form videos ranging from 15 seconds to 60 minutes in duration. Videos can be edited with filters and manipulated in different ways. The app provides the average person the opportunity to go viral by posting entertaining content. TikTok has strategically marketed to younger audiences, and although users must be 13 years of age or older to sign up, there is no method used by TikTok to verify the age of its users. Inappropriate content may be reaching younger audiences. According to recent analytics, the average time a user spends on TikTok is 95 minutes per day. This time is spent by users either creating and sharing short videos of themselves or watching existing TikTok videos uploaded to the platform already. This time exceeds the amounts spent on other social media platforms and apps such as Instagram (62 minutes) and X (30 minutes).³



There has been an increase in the number of adults on TikTok. The number of adult TikTok users in the United States sits at 42%⁴ and these numbers continue to grow today. The unfortunate part about more adults joining the platform is they are not all necessarily there to create a safe space for youth and some, without ill intent, do not realize how young the users can be. Although TikTok states in their Terms of Service that any inappropriate content will be taken down, it may take hours, days, or may not be taken down at all.

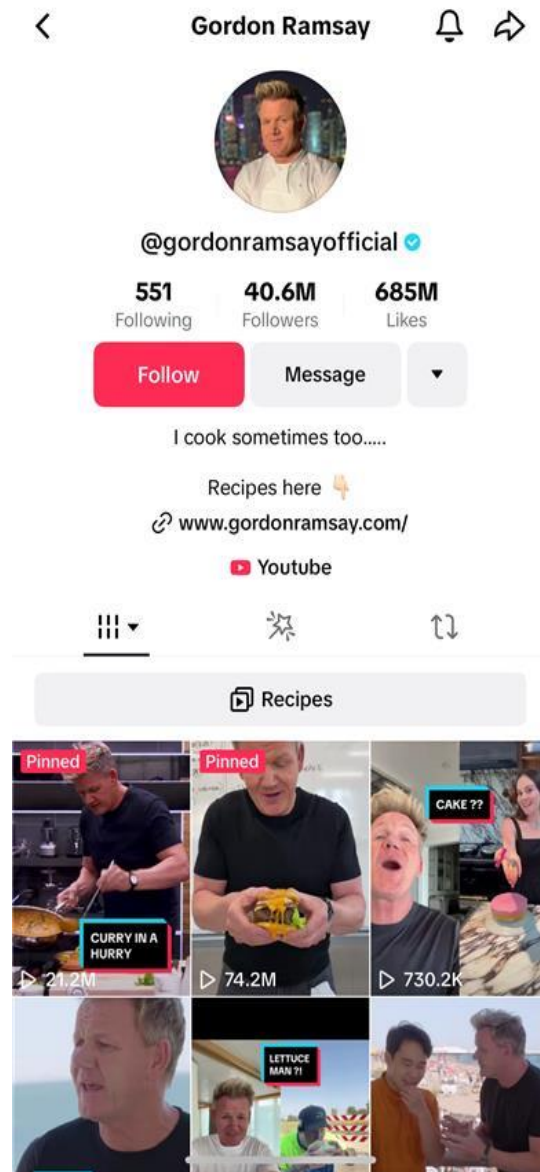
¹ <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/tik-tok-statistics/>

² <https://backlinko.com/tiktok-users>

³ <https://backlinko.com/tiktok-users#key-tik-tok-statistics/>

⁴ <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/tiktok-demographics#tiktok-users-age>

It is beneficial for SS/TA Teams to create an account to access features such as comments and view following/followers. This information can play a critical role in data collection when building the SOC's digital behavioral baseline. [Click here](#) to read more about account creation for Digital Threat Assessment®.



ANATOMY OF TIKTOK

Let's take a look at the anatomy of TikTok posts, profiles, and comment sections. Open the TikTok app to follow along!

Post

The diagram shows a TikTok post with a video of a dog lying on a carpet. The video is partially covered by a white sheet of paper with a drawing of a dog's head. Red arrows point to various elements of the post:

- Username**: Points to the text `@scottyhubs` with a verified badge and `1d ago`.
- Caption and hashtags**: Points to the text `I felt the urge to create 🌟 Art 🌟 again. #art #dog #wellness`.
- Sound**: Points to the text `luvenzhané Wallis Oppc`.
- The User's Profile Photo**: Points to the circular profile picture of the user.
- This video's Likes**: Points to the heart icon and the number `4.6M`.
- This video's Comments**: Points to the speech bubble icon and the number `37.9K`.
- This video's Shares**: Points to the share icon and the number `148.3K`.
- Date this video was posted**: Points to the text `1d ago`.

At the bottom of the post, there is a text input field that says `Add comment...`.

Profile

The image shows a social media profile for Scott Hubbard (@scottyhubs) with various elements annotated by red arrows:

- Vanity Name:** Scott Hubbard
- Profile Photo:** A circular profile picture of Scott Hubbard with a dog.
- Username:** @scottyhubs
- Stats:** 4,106 Following, 7.5M Followers, 257.6M Likes
- Buttons:** Follow, Message
- Bio:** Tucson
- User's external link:** <https://bit.ly/scottyhubs>
- Link to other platforms:** Instagram
- Posted Public Videos:** A grid of six video thumbnails, each with a 'Pinned' label and view counts (1.8M, 84.5M, 87.2M, 12.5K, 13.4K, 7,990).
- Reposted Videos:** A repost icon above the video grid.

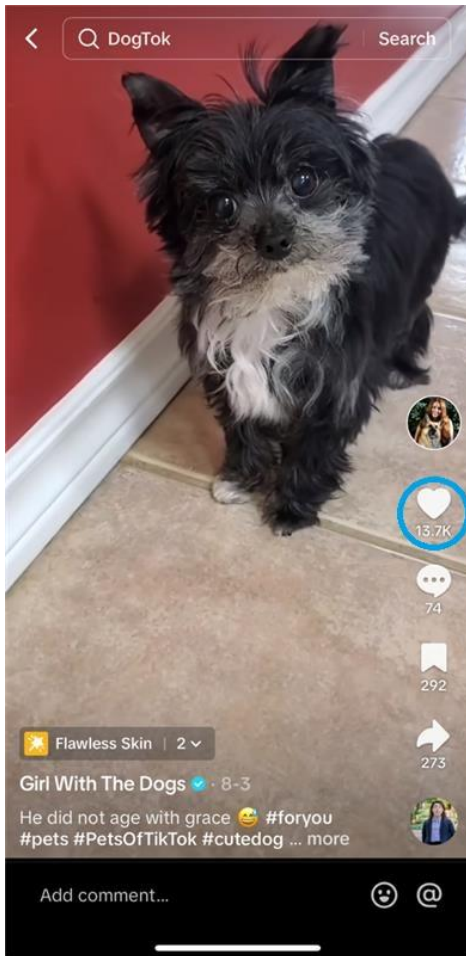
Comment Section



MOBILE APPLICATION VS. DESKTOP APPLICATION

TikTok's interface is visually quite different on the desktop application than it is on the mobile application. On interface views, here are some of the things we can see (as indicated in the photos below each caption in the following):

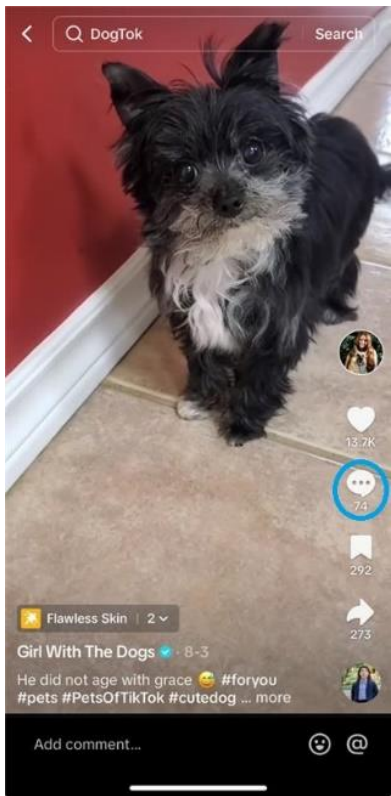
Likes: The number of likes on any individual post (Mobile on the left, Desktop on the right).



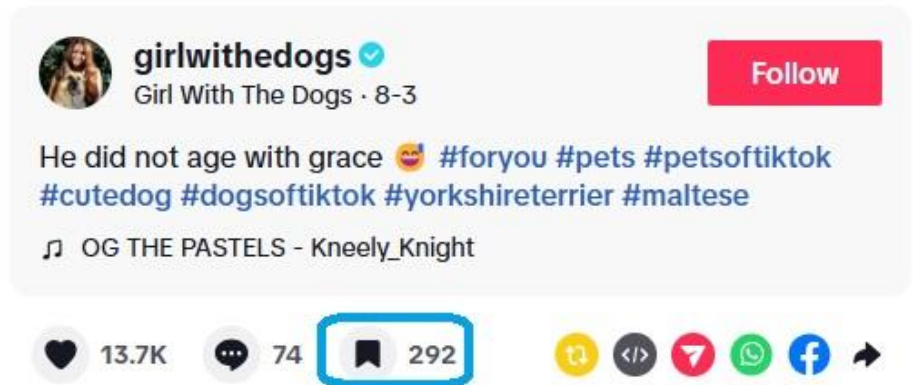
Shares: How many times an individual post has been shared (mobile only).



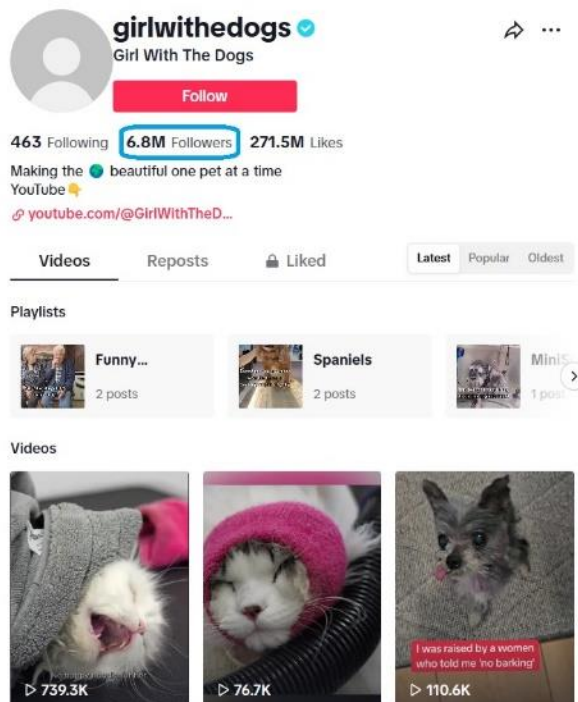
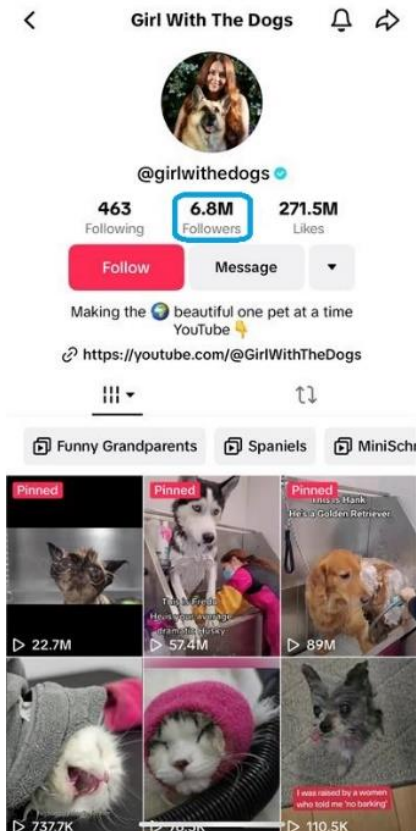
Comments: How many comments are on any individual post (Mobile on the left, Desktop on the right).



Favorites: How many favorites are on any individual post, and the option to favorite the post yourself (Mobile on the left, Desktop on the right).



Followers: How many followers the user has.



Following: How many individuals the user follows.

This screenshot shows the profile page for 'Girl With The Dogs' on a social media platform. The profile name is 'Girl With The Dogs' and the handle is '@girlwithedogs'. The 'Following' count is 463, which is highlighted with a blue box. Other statistics shown are 6.8M Followers and 271.5M Likes. The bio reads 'Making the beautiful one pet at a time YouTube'. A link to the YouTube channel is provided: 'https://youtube.com/@GirlWithTheDogs'. Below the profile information, there are navigation tabs for 'Funny Grandparents', 'Spaniels', and 'Mini Schnauzers'. A grid of video thumbnails is displayed, with the top row containing three pinned videos: 'Today I discovered a new species' (22.7M views), 'This is Fredo He is your average dramatic Husky' (57.4M views), and 'This is Hank He is a Golden Retriever' (89M views).

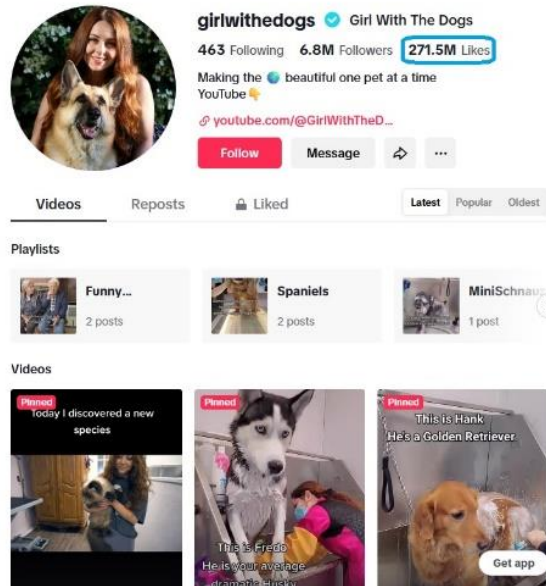
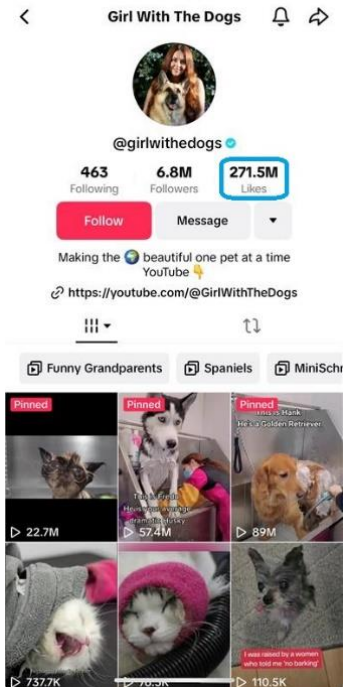
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Username and vanity name of the profile.

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Account Likes: Total number of likes the user has accumulated overall.

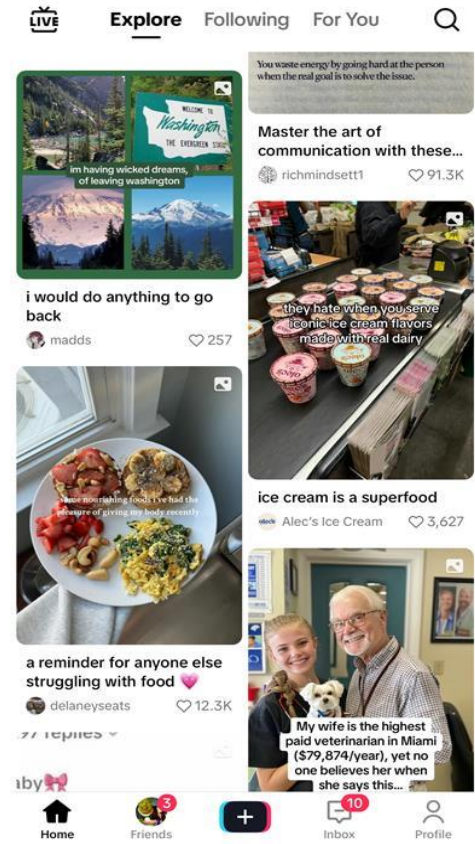


Music or sounds used on individual posts.



This information is beneficial to SS/TA Teams as it allows the team to identify who is interacting with the SOC through likes, comments, or shares of the posts uploaded by the SOC.

On a mobile device, you can use the Explore page to view trending hashtags, sounds, users, videos, and effects.

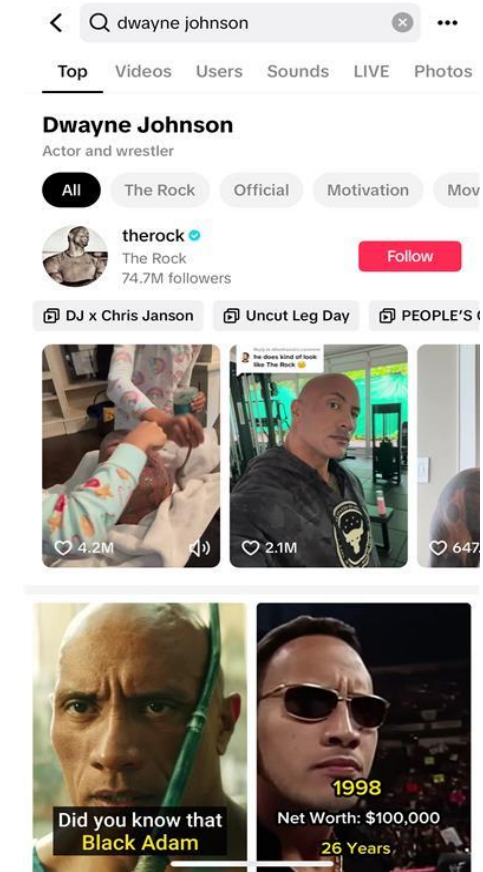


Or use the search function to find:

- Users
- Videos
- Sounds
- Hashtags
- Lives

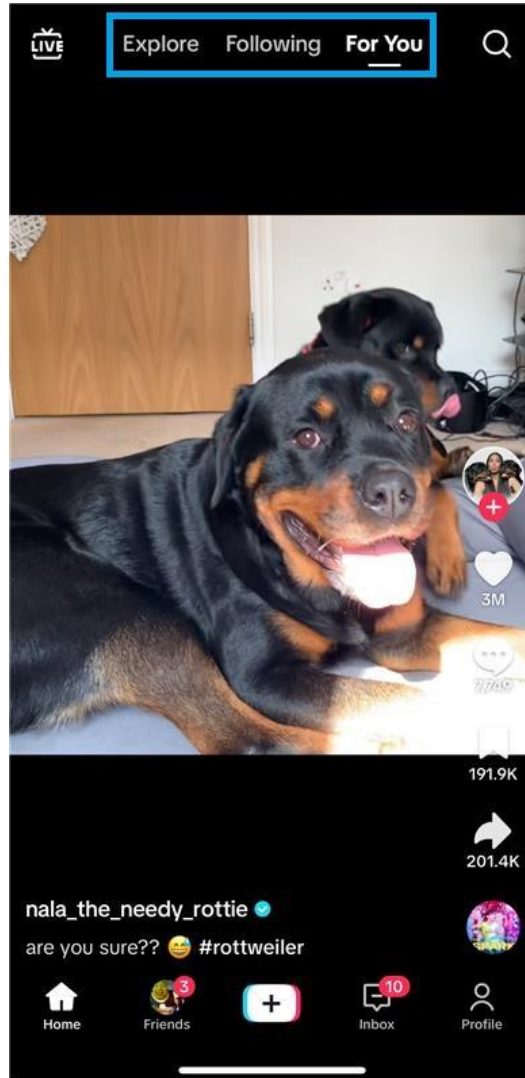
A recent update to the desktop view allows us to:

- Search users
- View your "For You" page
- View your "Following" page
- View your notifications
- Upload a video



For SS/TA Teams, this is helpful for data collection. The mobile application can provide more information when searching an account compared to the desktop version.

The features available to users who do not already have a TikTok account are limited, specifically on the desktop view, as the user will not be able to access information such as the comments section.



ALGORITHMS

Social media platforms are designed to keep us engaged. How do they capture user’s attention so effectively? TikTok uses a powerful algorithm to observe the content users enjoy seeing based on their interactions. According to TikTok: *“The system recommends content by ranking videos based on a combination of factors—starting from interests you express as a new user and adjusting for things you indicate you’re not interested in, too.”*⁵ As the algorithm learns what content users view and interact with the most, it will suggest related or similar content to the user via the For You Page, also known as the FYP.

How Does This Algorithm Garner the Data Required to Recommend Content?

User Interactions

Videos liked or shared, accounts followed, comments posted, and content created.

Video Information

Captions, Hashtags, or Sounds.

Device and Account Settings

Language preferences, country settings, and device type.

⁵ <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/how-tiktok-recommends-videos-for-you>

FOR YOU PAGE

One of the reasons for TikTok's popularity and growth is its high engagement rate compared to other social media platforms. Many followers not only watch but also engage with influencers.

Each TikTok user has an individual preference for what type of video content they are most interested in watching. This type of content is determined by TikTok's [algorithm](#) and is then pushed onto the user's personalized For You Page (FYP). TikTok has published a detailed [blog post](#) about how FYP recommendations are generated. According to them, the FYP's algorithms are based on the preferences and activity history of individual users including:

- Video likes
- Video shares
- Accounts followed
- Comments posted
- Videos created

Even data such as how much of a video was watched by a user contributes to the algorithm. Watching a video from start to finish is a strong sign of interest and carries weight. Other factors include:

- Length/runtime
- Captions
- Sounds
- Stickers
- Hashtags

Hashtags specifically play a big role in what users see on their page. Any user who watches or creates a video with a specific hashtag will be more likely to see videos that use the same hashtag in the future. More information about hashtags and how they work can be found in Safer Schools Together's (SST's) [Raising Digitally Responsible Youth: A Parent's Guide](#).

TikTok has also stated that it takes a user's device and account settings into consideration, although they do not hold as much weight as compared to time spent watching videos and user likes. Some examples of similar settings include:

- Language preferences
- Country settings
- Device type

What makes TikTok so alluring is that it gives ordinary people the ability to go viral overnight. This happens with TikTok because the total number of followers an account has does not result in their posts surfacing more on users' FYPs. Here is what TikTok says about that:

“While a video is likely to receive more views if posted by an account that has more followers, by virtue of that account having built up a larger follower base, neither follower count nor whether the account has had previous high-performing videos are direct factors in the recommendation system.”⁶

There is a theory in the TikTok world called “The Batch Effect”. It is speculated that once a video is uploaded, TikTok will show that video to different batches of people at different times. The way users react to the video (through watch time, likes, comments, shares, etc.) will determine if that video will be shared with more people. The greater the engagement, the greater the chance of it showing up on other batches of users’ FYP.

Filters and effects are also used to make videos more compelling and engaging for viewers. TikTok offers creators and brands a wide variety of filters and effects to choose from and regularly releases new options. This vast library is a big part of what sets TikTok apart from its competitors, such as [Instagram Reels](#). Some users have noted that TikTok appears to give greater priority to videos that use effects—specifically those that are currently trending.

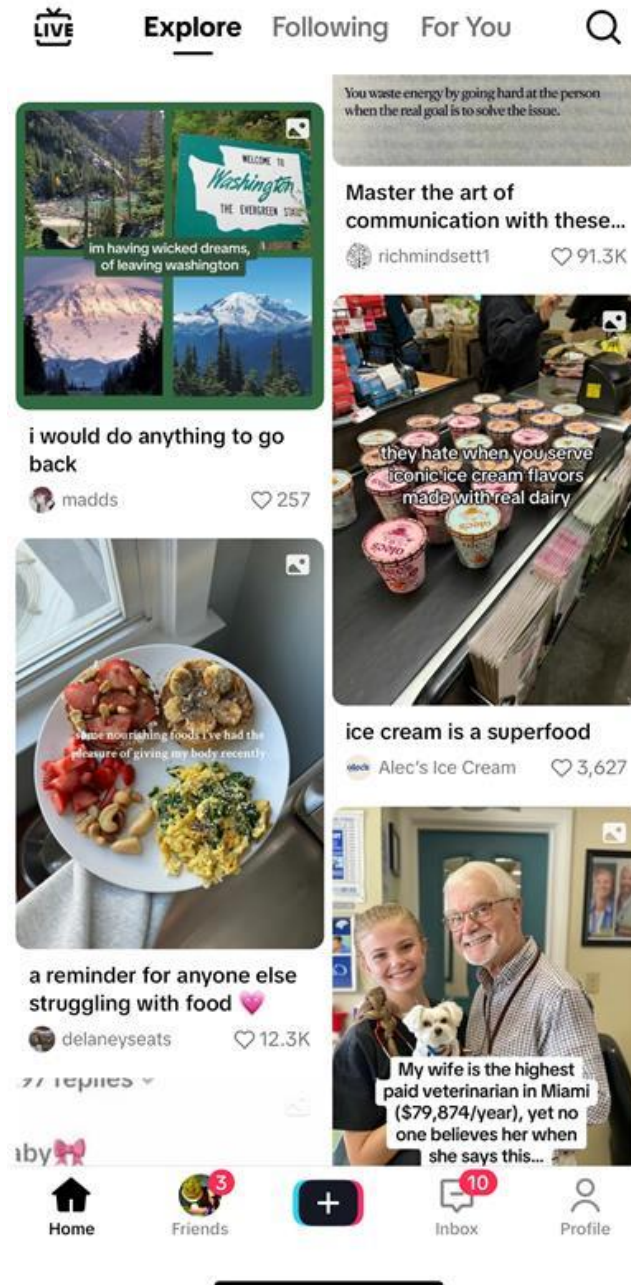
Many TikTok users already know how to engage with its algorithm. SST’s Threat Analyst team has seen youth use trending hashtags, filters, and effects on their uploads in hopes they will show up on more users’ FYPs. SS/TA Teams should be familiar with the benefits of the FYP, as it is the page that is run by the algorithm and provides users with similar content to what they already consume. If an SOC is the subject of a School Safety Concern or Threat Assessment, it is important to know what they are looking at on social media platforms. TikTok’s algorithm suggests posts and interactions based on what the user is already engaging with—providing important information for your SS/TA Teams.

Most users spend their time split between their “Following” feed and their FYP. This is due to the algorithm showing content it anticipates the user will enjoy based on what they have already engaged with.

⁶ <https://www.socialmediatoday.com/news/how-tiktoks-algorithm-works-as-explained-by-tiktok/580153/>

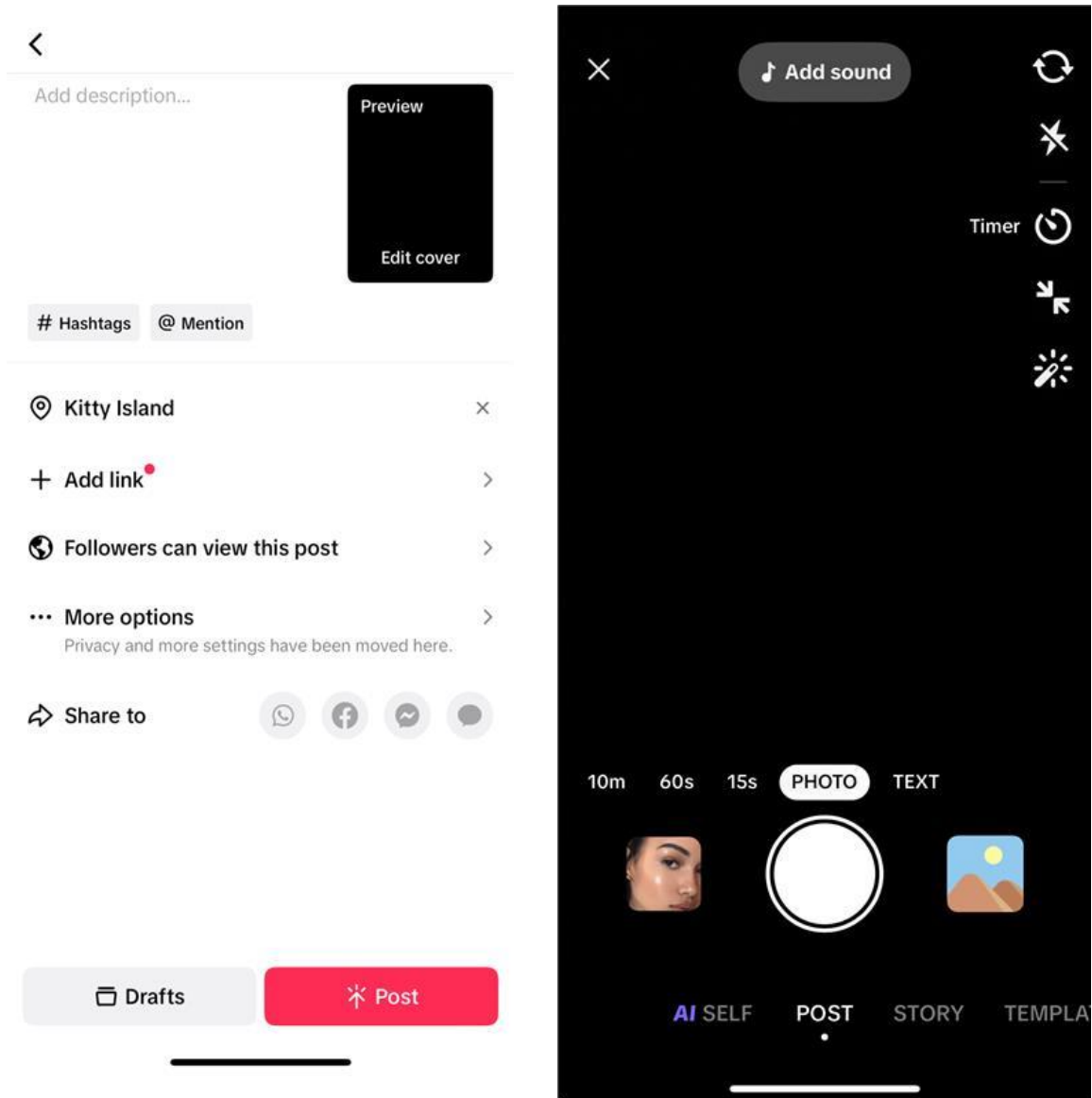
EXPLORE PAGE

The Explore page is where users will find sponsored advertisements, trending hashtags, trending effects, trending users, and trending sounds that are recommended to them based on their algorithm.



TIKTOK FEATURES

TikTok requires the user's permission to access their device's camera and microphone. Users can also upload previously recorded videos or images.

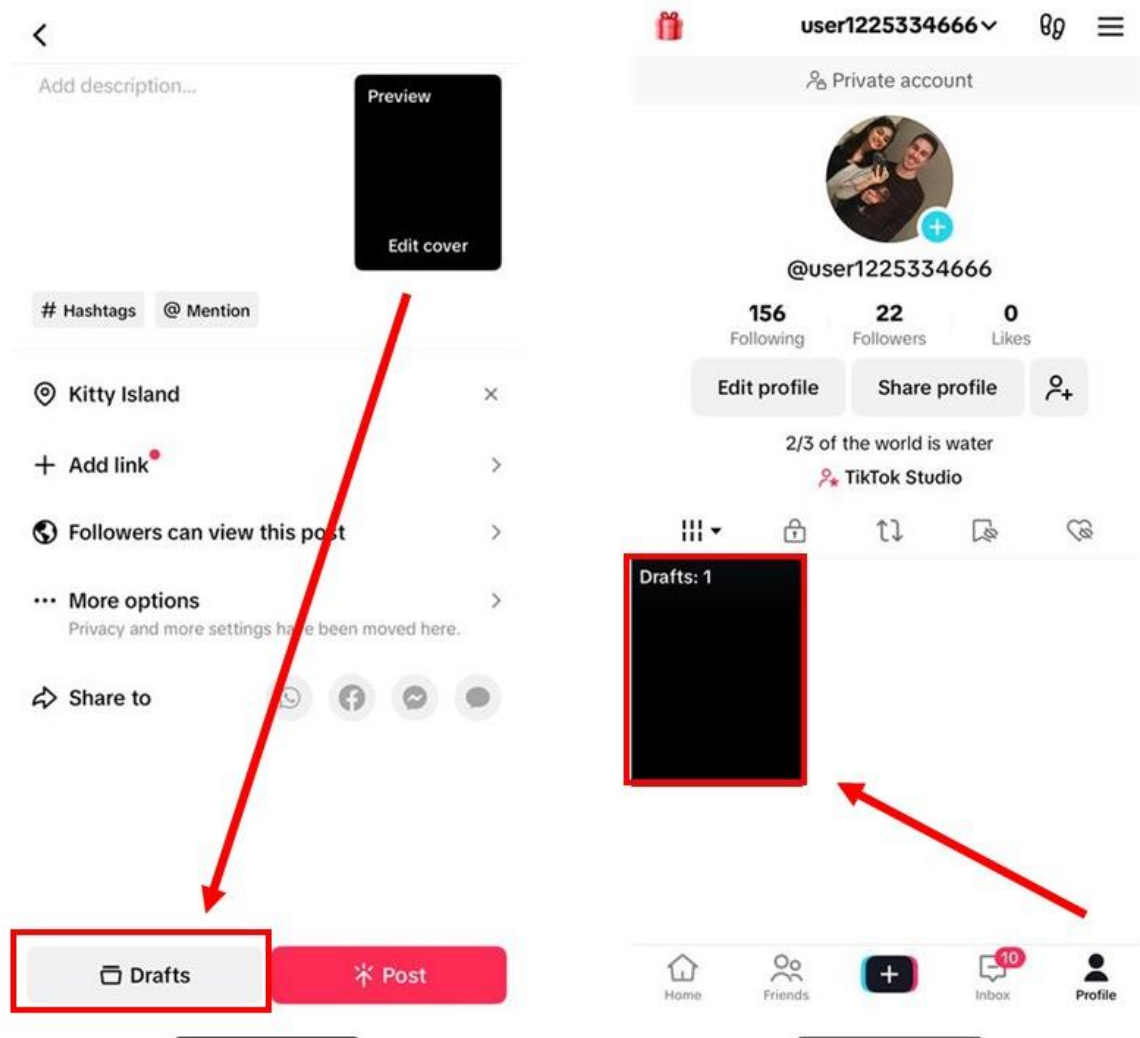


TikTok videos that were previously removed from the app, regardless of whether they have been deleted by the user or due to a [Terms of Service](#) violation, can be uploaded again.

DRAFTS

Videos that users have created but do not want to post yet can be stored in their drafts. The User is allowed to see their drafts and post them whenever they choose to. If an SOC allegedly has a video they are about to post that is worrisome and your SS/TA Team has the opportunity to check the device but finds no video on their camera roll, it may be because the content has been uploaded as a draft on TikTok and deleted from the device.

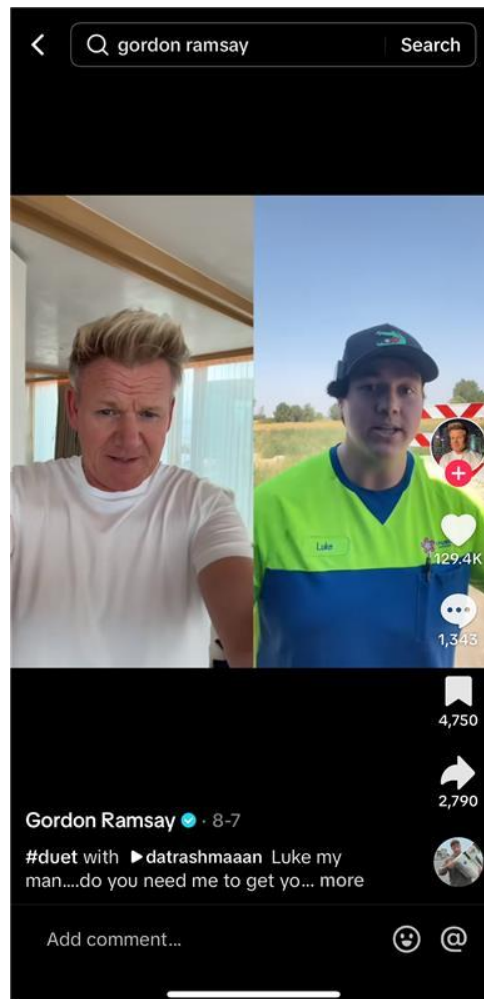
These drafts can be posted at any time. They do not retain the date from when they were first recorded and they can be edited and recorded many times. By deleting the app from the device, drafts are also deleted from the account.



WAYS TO INTERACT WITH OTHERS ON TIKTOK

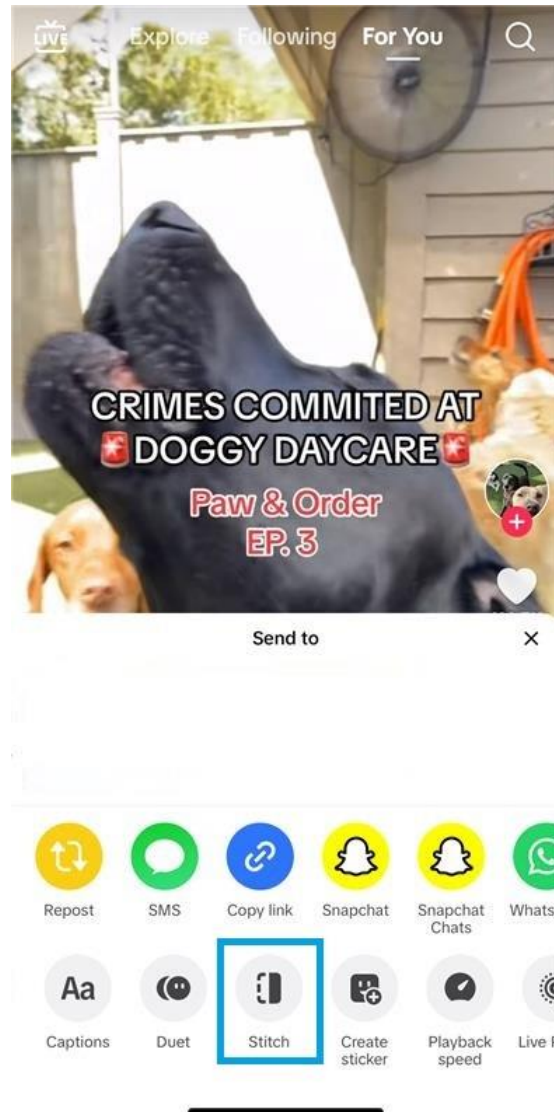
Duet

A Duet is a feature that allows users to occupy a split-screen with another user. This could include a friend, celebrity, or even a previous video of themselves. The Duet format shows both the original video and the new video side-by-side playing simultaneously. This feature may be used to react to videos, add content to videos, or for users to attach themselves to a popular video in an attempt to gain followers and internet popularity. Users can also Duet with an existing Duet video, creating potentially infinite Duets that interact with each other; this is called a Duet Chain. Duets are noted in the caption of the video with the original creator's username. If the original video is deleted from the platform, the Duet will not be removed automatically. When SS/TA Teams are made aware of a worrisome video, removing the original does not guarantee that it does not still exist on the platform, potentially as a Duet. It is possible to turn off Duets for videos, making it so other people cannot Duet your video.



Stitch

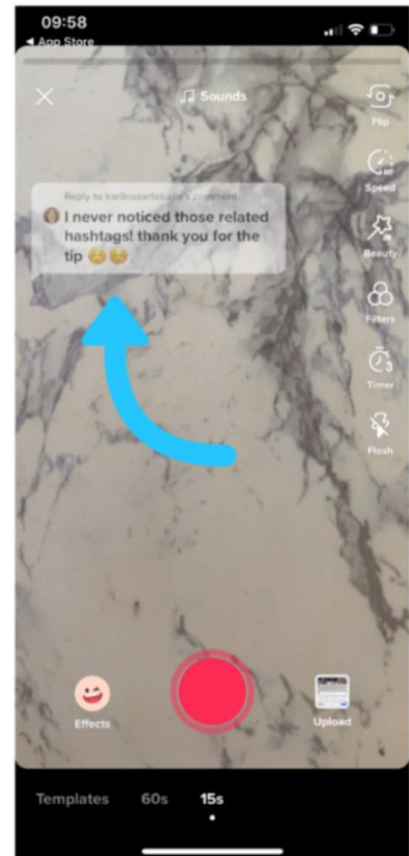
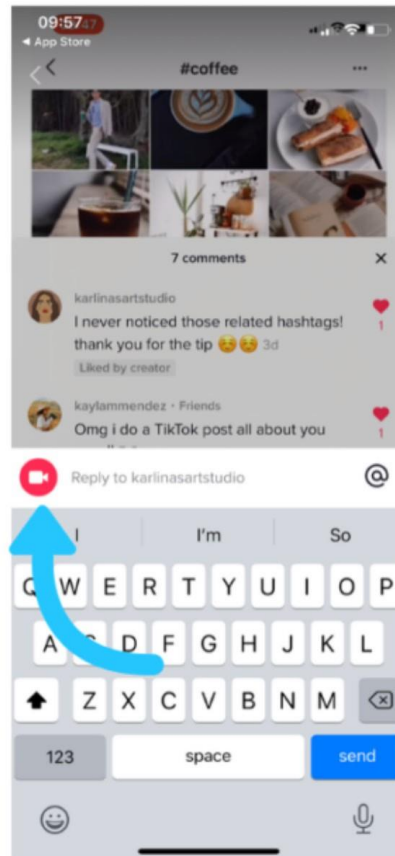
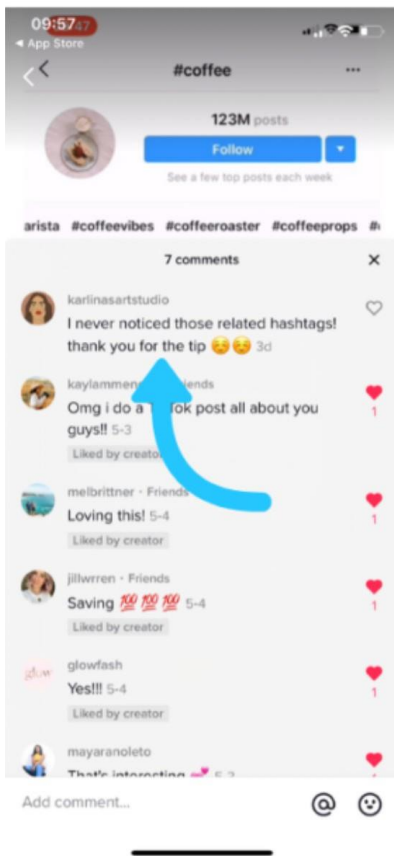
A Stitch is used to place a section of a user's video into another. The user selects a portion of the original video's audio and video and then puts their own audio and video at the end. This can be done multiple times to create a chain effect similar to Duet Chains. This function is commonly used in "challenges" where the original audio and video are used to introduce what the user will be showing in their content. SS/TA Teams should be aware of how to detect when a video is a Stitch since it only takes a portion of the original user's video, what is said or viewed could be misleading, and may cause viewers to misinterpret the intent. A Stitch allows users to trim and edit other users' video clips onto their own. It is possible to turn off Stitches for videos so other people cannot Stitch your video.



Responding to Comments in a Video

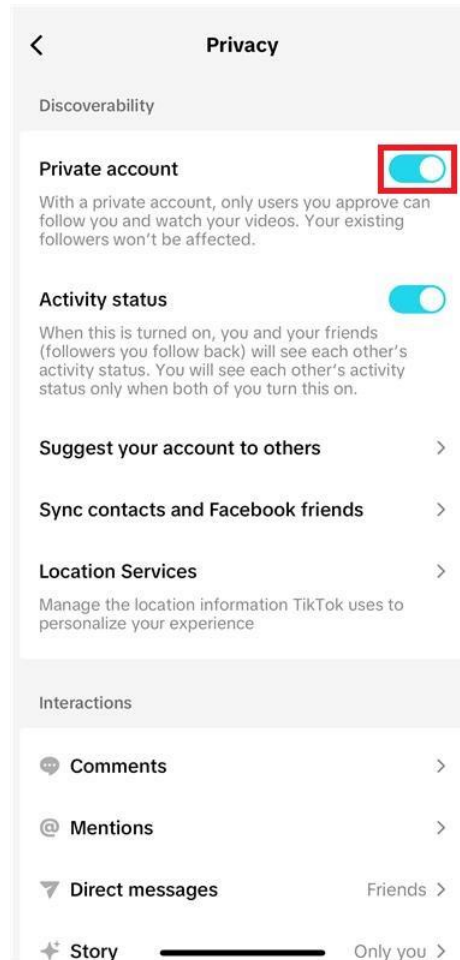
Any user that allows comments can respond to any specific comments made on their posts in video form. It is a common way creators interact with their audience and can be used to call out poor behavior. With the comment appearing on the video, the username of the commenter is also in video format. Clicking the comment will take the user to the comment on the original video.

If an SOC has made a threatening comment and other users have begun creating videos about it, SS/ TA Teams need to know how to locate those usernames. It is equally as important to know how to find the original comment on the original video.



PRIVACY SETTINGS

Users can make an account private so only their profile image, username, vanity/display name, and bio are visible.



Users can also select who can send them comments and direct messages or if accounts can do a Duet/ Stitch/React with them. TikTok allows users to set their accounts to private. When first downloading the app, the user's account is made public by default. The user can change preferences to private by visiting their settings. Private content remains visible to TikTok but is blocked from being viewed by TikTok users who the account holder has not authorized to view content. Users can choose whether any other user, or only their "friends", may interact with them through the app via comments, direct messages, and "React" or "Duet" videos. Users can also set specific videos to either public, friends only, or private regardless of whether the account is set to private or not.

Searching on TikTok

Users have full search capabilities on a mobile device where there is an opportunity to gather information by searching for users, specific videos, sounds, and hashtags. Desktop searches can be effective, however, having a device that is dedicated for this purpose is imperative to ensure our SS/TA Teams are gathering all publicly viewable information. It's always important that teams ask peers or associates of the SOC if they know the TikTok username or vanity name that the SOC goes by, which can make searching easier.

Advanced methods of searching such as Boolean Operator Searches (also known as Google Dorking) can also be used.

Law Enforcement Guides and Emergency Request/Preservation Orders

It is imperative that "emergency requests" or "preservation orders" be submitted promptly. If TikTok receives an emergency request on a different day than the incident occurred, the platform may not deem the situation an emergency.

Take note: the [User Notice Policies](#) are outlined in the [Terms of Service](#) and involve the social media platform reaching out to the account holder. If the account holder is a subject of a School Safety Concern or Threat Assessment, they will be notified that there has been an Emergency Request or Preservation Order made regarding their account. When submitting a request regarding an SOC, SS/ TA Teams must ensure they are informing TikTok that due to the nature of the investigation, it would be beneficial not to notify the user about this information request. This is not always a guarantee, but it is best practice to take these steps in order to preserve the SS/TA process.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[How to Use Tiktok - Complete Beginners Guide](#)



[TikTok Review and Recommended Age of Use - Common Sense Media](#)



[How the TikTok Algorithm Works](#)

[TikTok Therapy: What Happens When Mental Health Struggles Go Viral?](#)



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