

Common Sense Media AI Risk Assessment:

Recommended content in TikTok

TikTok's never-ending "For You" feed, powered by its recommendation system, can be entertaining and dangerous.

Last updated: Oct 8, 2024

Overall risk level: High ▾

Type of AI: Applied Use ▾

Type of Review: Product Review ▾

Other Information:

- [How We Review](#)

Key Takeaways

1. **Recommended content on TikTok is a personalized feed that shows videos a user might engage with based on signals like past interactions and watch history.** TikTok's "For You" page suggests videos using a variety of signals creating a continuous stream that helps you discover new topics and trends without explicitly searching for new topics or creators.
2. **Recommended content can support learning, exploration, and mental health awareness, but risks remain.** TikTok can help users discover useful information, like DIY tutorials, recipes, and other personalized guidance. For kids and teens, the recommendation system can help create supportive communities and reduce stigma around mental health issues. Many users also rely on TikTok as a search tool, showing its usefulness beyond just entertainment.
3. **Recommended content can lead users to spend more time on TikTok than they realize, making it harder to take breaks.** The "For You" feed automatically plays one video after another, which can keep users, especially younger ones, engaged for longer than they may intend. Most content seen on TikTok comes from recommendations, which can lead to long sessions that are difficult to control.

4. **Recommended content has already caused real world harm, and can sometimes surface content that is inappropriate or unsafe.** Investigations have found that TikTok can quickly recommend content related to self-harm, suicide, or eating disorders, even to new accounts. Users can be exposed to these harmful topics in just minutes, which is a concern especially for younger users.
5. **Recommended content can spread confusing guidance, and in some cases, misinformation to young users.** TikTok is a source of news for many kids and teens, but studies show that some top search results contain false or misleading information. Additionally, rules about who can use TikTok are unclear, and safety guides for parents are complex, which can make it harder to protect minors from inappropriate content or overuse.

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Common Sense Media Risk Assessment

What is Recommended content in TikTok?

[Learn more about all recommendation systems in social media here.](#)

Unlike other social media platforms, TikTok was initially designed around entertainment, not social connections. Over time it has become more social, in part driven by its recommendation systems. Every aspect of TikTok has a recommendation algorithm behind it: The "For You" feed allows users to discover new content related to their interests, the "Following" feed recommends content from creators that the user follows, the "Friends" feed recommends content from friends, and the "Search" feature recommends content for a user to search. (One slightly social feature is that TikTok recommends "Comments" on posts that it thinks you'll be most interested in reading.)

TikTok's "For You" feed is where users spend the most time. Videos you see in this feed are fed to you from TikTok's recommendation system, based on other videos you have interacted with or watched. It is not full of people you know, or things you've explicitly told it you want to see, unless you train it to do so with your behavior. This feed never runs out of material. As with other social media platforms, TikTok relies on this engagement for ad revenue.

How it works

[Learn how recommendation systems in social media work here.](#)

TikTok shares [minimal information](#) about how their recommenders work. Aside from protecting their secret sauce, another reason for the lack of transparency is that TikTok itself doesn't own the recommendation system—it is [provided by the engineers who work for ByteDance](#), the Chinese company that owns [the platform](#). What we know of the signals they use occur across three areas: user actions, content information, and user information. For the "For You" feed specifically, these signals may include:

- **Linger activity:** While TikTok doesn't disclose this, [investigations like this one done by the Wall Street Journal](#) have shown that you can be profiled even if you don't state an interest or take any intentional action. Simply by tracking every moment you watch, rewatch, or linger on any given video, the app can begin to shape the content you see from their recommendation system and tailor it to what TikTok believes are your interests.
- **User actions:** content you like, share, comment on, and watch in full or skip, as well as accounts of followers that you follow back.

- **Content information:** audio and visual data, hashtags, number of views, and the country where the content was published.
- **User information:** device settings, language preference, location, time zone and day, and device type.

With this information, the systems:

1. **Predict** how likely you are to interact with a given video.
2. **Rank** eligible videos by their prediction scores.
3. **Check for similarity** across top-ranked videos and replace any that are too similar to each other.
4. **Apply additional rules** such as disallowing the recommendation of content created by users under age 16.

Where it's best

[Learn what all recommendation systems in social media do best.](#)

- **TikTok can play an important role in teen mental health.** For many young people struggling with mental health and well-being, TikTok is an extremely powerful influence. At its most positive, the platform's equally powerful recommendation systems [have helped](#) create awareness, reduce stigma, and build supportive communities.
- **It's not just a social media platform, it's (increasingly) a search engine.** [One study](#) found that 64% of Gen Zers and 49% of millennials have used TikTok as a search engine. Even more strikingly, nearly 1 in 10 Gen Zers prefer it over traditional search engines like Google, and 21% of 18- to 24-year-olds [start their searches on TikTok](#). Younger users gravitate to TikTok to search for everything from recipes to DIY tutorials and recommendations for a range of topics. And, notably, they like it in part because the content is personalized—in other words, it is driven by TikTok's recommendation system. This also presents one of TikTok's biggest risks—see below for more.

The biggest risks

[Learn about the risks common to all recommendation systems in social media.](#)

- **Investigations show how easily TikTok recommends harmful content.**
 - Two global reports from Amnesty International in November 2023—"[Driven into Darkness: How TikTok's 'For You' Feed Encourages Self-Harm and Suicidal Ideation](#)" and "['I Feel Exposed': Caught in TikTok's Surveillance](#)"

[Web](#)"—highlight the ongoing harms for children around the world caused by TikTok's recommendation system. Notably, they found that mere minutes into their testing, more than half of the videos in the "For You" feed were "related to mental health struggles, with multiple recommended videos in a single hour romanticizing, normalizing, or encouraging suicide."

- A December 2022 [report by the Center for Countering Digital Hate](#) found that new accounts in their study were recommended suicide-related content within 2.6 minutes and eating disorder content within 8 minutes.
- See more in our AI Principles assessment below for *Keep Kids & Teens Safe*.
- **TikTok is heavily used by minors.** In 2023, TikTok had over 1 billion active users in 150 countries, with 150–170 million users in the U.S. alone. While we don't know the exact number of minors who use TikTok, over 20% of TikTok users are estimated to be under age 18. A [2023 study](#) of over 400,000 families found that children age 4 to 18 spend an average of 112 minutes on TikTok per day in the U.S. Globally, the number is 120 minutes.
- **Recommenders are addictive.** TikTok automatically moves you from one video to the next without any idea of what is coming. This is unlike other video platforms such as YouTube, for example, where you can see the title of the video before you get too far into it. This has the effect of putting you quickly into autopilot mode as you're flooded with content that TikTok knows is likely to keep you engaged. In fact, a 2021 *Wall Street Journal* investigation, "[How TikTok's Algorithm Figures Out Your Deepest Desires](#)," surfaced that an estimated 90–95% of the content that users see on TikTok is based on its recommendation system (for comparison, Instagram reported this number at 50% in 2024).
- **TikTok is a major source of news ... and misinformation.** About a [third of U.S. adults under age 30 regularly get news from TikTok](#). Unfortunately, studies have found that [1 in 5 of the top 20 TikTok search results on relevant news contained misinformation](#). This is made worse by TikTok's recommendation system—on average, TikTok's recommenders [amplify misinformation 29 times](#) more than other content.
- **It is clear that ByteDance recognizes how addictive and influential its technology is.** In China, the version of TikTok available for young kids (called Douyin) is available for only 40 minutes per day, and the content is dedicated to science experiments that you can do at home, information on museum exhibits, and other educational videos, as well as content related to patriotism and more. This is in

stark contrast to the TikTok available in the U.S. ByteDance could be applying the same logic to the rest of the world, but they choose not to.

Limits to use

- The [guides that TikTok has created](#) for families are lengthy and include numerous links to other explanatory content. While we applaud TikTok for making this content available, it is a dizzying maze. There are dozens and dozens of choices that are dropped in a parent's lap to try to make TikTok safe for their children, but it is up to parents to find this content for themselves.
- **It is unclear who is allowed to use TikTok.** TikTok's [community guidelines](#) state that users must be older than age 13. However, they further describe the [under-13 TikTok experience](#) that you enter if you create a new account with a birth date that shows you are under 13 in the U.S. Meanwhile, the Terms of Service stipulate only that users under 18 are supposed to have parental consent to use the service, but say nothing about a requirement to be 13 or older. In addition, there are no age gates when signing up. This is at best confusing, and highly irresponsible, given the risks to younger users.