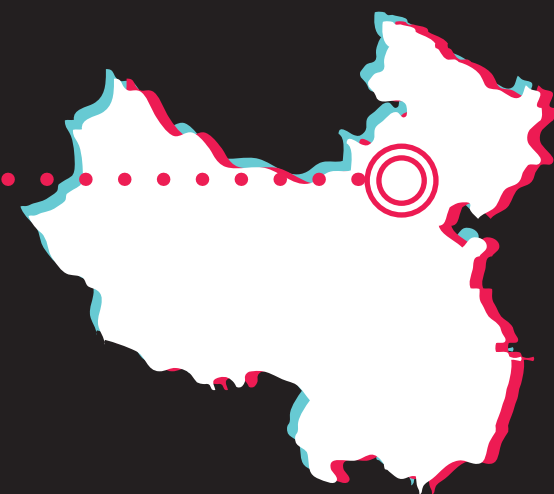


RUNNING THE RISKS

BYTEDANCE

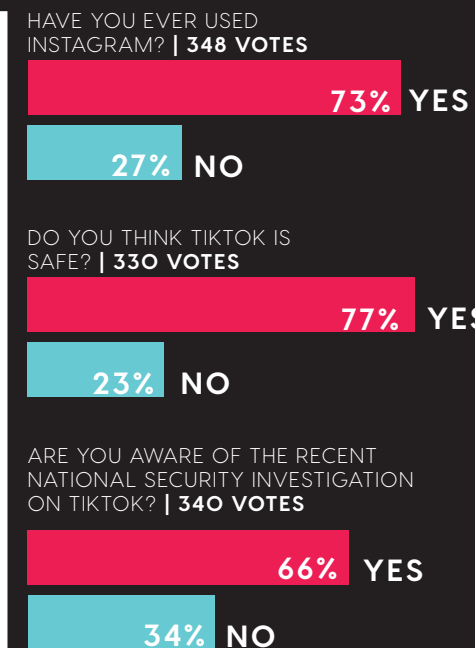
CHINESE INTERNET TECHNOLOGY COMPANY OPERATING SEVERAL MACHINE LEARNING-ENABLED CONTENT PLATFORMS, HEADQUARTERED IN BEIJING



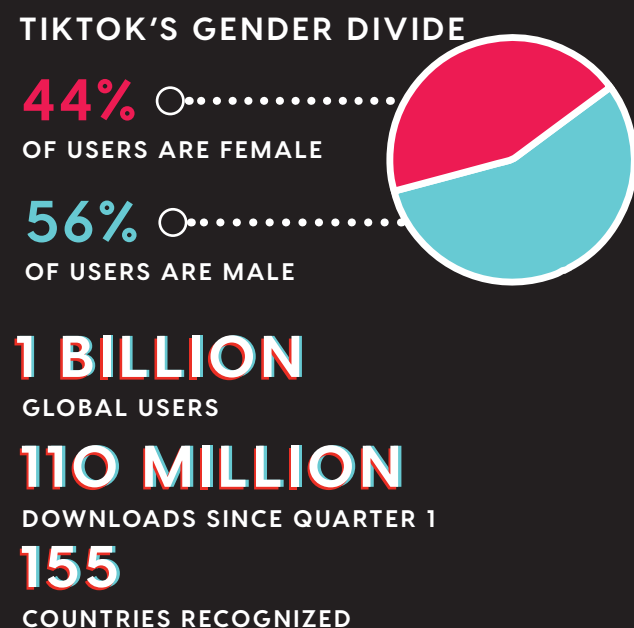
by | lila tulp & ben henschel

TikTok, a 15-second video publishing app, has captivated East students and teenagers everywhere, but its growing popularity has led to a national security investigation regarding risks that root from the app's Beijing-based owner — but East students are willing to take the risk

EAST STATS



DEMOGRAPHICS



TIKTOK TERMS

#FYP
the main feed channel where people see videos. If your video makes the for you page, you've made it

TIKTOK FAMOUS
If you've made it on the for you page multiple times and gathered a mass following, you're famous

EBOY
a type of tiktoker who wears silver chains, black clothing, skater brands and full of angst

TIKTOK TREND
when a certain song, dance move or makeup look floods your feed

TikTok was like a drug to senior Camryn Gossick — one that tightened its grip with every like, every post, every click.

It knows what she likes and what she doesn't better than half the people she's gone to school with since kindergarten — and it only took a month.

For senior Will Green, it's a competition. There's always a chance his TikTok, an editable 15-second video clip, could go viral after he posts one — and on his 24th attempt, one did. For the next three days his eyes were glued to his phone, watching as his 116,100 likes rolled in.

Sophomore Sydney Beck considers it her mental break, just mindless scrolling with her friends and when she's bored. But the app still consumes a good two hours of her day, and she wishes she could cut back.

All three can recognize that they're hooked, but



[Teens] feel a false sense of security online because it is a 'bubble' where things aren't real because they are sitting safely in their rooms.

Detective John Stirling | Shawnee PD

aren't ready to act on it — even with the knowledge that their information on the app isn't just theirs.

Recent security threats — including the collection of profiles, IP addresses, location-related data, cookies and other sensitive personal information — regarding TikTok have been discovered. The youth-majority app and its Beijing-based corporate owner, ByteDance, have caused the U.S. Committee on Foreign Investment to launch a federal investigation. The data collection could translate to users' profile information — such as names, phone numbers and locations, being stolen without their knowledge.

The uncovered risks have led Congress to call TikTok to testify, to which the company declined under reasons of late notice. And despite the potential vulnerability of their personal data, East students are invested enough in the app to run the risk.

"There is a sense of blinders with teens where they either are not educated on the dangers or they choose to believe that 'This can't happen to me,'" Detective John Stirling, who specializes in computer and cell phone forensics, said in an email. "They feel a false sense of security online because it is a 'bubble' where things aren't real because they are sitting safely in their rooms."

Bought by ByteDance in August of 2018 — under its former name, Musical.ly — TikTok's affiliation with the Chinese government, given its billion-user platform and growing popularity, has raised questions of whether or not China has access to the app's users' data. Although other technology companies and apps like Facebook and WhatsApp store personal data, TikTok differs because their Chinese ownership allows them to operate outside of U.S. control and laws.

"I would believe the main concern here comes in the fact that a foreign government is in control of this particular app," Stirling said in an email. "Other used apps like Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, etc. can

potentially expose just as much information, however, these are American held companies... with a foreign government presiding over the company which runs TikTok, they will have different laws which dictate what information can be used and what for."

TikTok claimed in a statement Nov. 6 that all U.S. user data is stored in the states, with a backup server in Singapore.

But according to an Oct. 23 letter to the U.S. Office of National Intelligence sent by U.S. Senators Charles E. Schumer (D-NY) and Tim Cotton (R-AR), TikTok has censored content deemed politically-sensitive to China — particularly regarding the recent Hong Kong protests — and has potentially stored American user data. In the letter they claim the app is "a potential counterintelligence threat [they] cannot ignore."

TikTok has also been a platform for propaganda videos released by terrorist organizations, with over two dozen accounts affiliated with the Islamic State (ISIS) identified and removed by the app in October. ISIS and other organizations target TikTok in hopes of recruiting the uniquely young user base and inciting potential enthusiasts globally, according to District Police Officer Tony Wollen.

The recent claims denouncing TikTok's safety and security came after the app violated the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act in February by illegally collecting personal information from children under the age of 13 without parental consent, and paid a settlement of \$5.7 million to the Federal Trade Commission.

But the recent allegations and investigations haven't cut down the app's popularity among East students — and a substantial portion are unaware of them. 77% of the East community polled on Instagram believe the app is safe, and only 34% answered that they were aware of the investigation.

And those that know seem to be willing to run the risk.

"People don't realize how much internet addiction [and the question of safety] overwhelms people," Green said. "Too many people care about it and are hooked on it for it to just...go away."

To Green, the app's ability to reel users in and connect them with kids "just like them" curbs the fear of students lost interest — TikTok's unique community is built through shared interests without richer, more famous users dominating viewership like YouTube and Vine. Everyone has a shot at going viral on TikTok, Green said, which incentivizes users to create and watch more videos — all tailored specifically to them.

"Your 'For You' page is based on everything you've ever liked before, so it brings up more and more content that would pertain to you," Green said. "TikTok knows what you want to see."

"The more you use it, you can't get off of it — one day, I was on it for like seven hours," Gossick said.

When Gossick first downloaded the app in August, her suggested videos showed a wide range of personalities — 40-year-old cowboys, comedians, "e-girls." But as she spent more time on the app, TikTok recognized who she was through her liked posts. Within a few days of constant usage, her feed featured teenage girls dancing in their bedrooms and competing for TikTok stardom

around their high schools — each video mirrored Gossick and her group of friends.

TikTok's algorithm continuously combines users' views, likes, profile information and post shares to narrow down the types of videos they'd be interested in, and directs those videos to their 'For You' feed — the more you use the app, the better it gets to know you, according to Green and Gossick.

The algorithm's ability to silently profile their users and pique their interest speaks to its danger, according to Woollen. The "15 seconds of fun" from videos can mask the potential threats, such as private groups that invite minors into them to send pornographic videos and promotional material for terrorist groups, Woollen said.

The dangers lying within are veiled by the app's communal sense of shared interest, Sydney Beck said.

"You're into [this subject]? You'll have that side of TikTok," Beck said. "And if you're just looking for a fun time, you'll be into that side. There's just so many different sides to it that anyone can enjoy it and end up spending a lot of time. It's so much at this point that there isn't really, like, a stopping point."

Whether or not they care to stop, students should be taking every action to protect their information and digital safety, according to Stirling and Woollen.

There are a variety of ways to do this, Woolen and Stirling said — but to them, more important than any is realizing that the information and occurrences in the posted videos affect more than just themselves.

"When you go on TikTok and you put anything like name, address, phone number, whatever is in there could affect you, it could affect family, it could affect school" Woollen said. "You think, 'Hey, if I put that out there, who's it really going to affect?' That's why we really want the young people of East to basically be policing themselves with this."

Users should think "big audience" when posting videos on TikTok, considering its foreign ownership and global user base, Woollen and PVPD Detective Seth Meyer said. With the concerns of whether or not the data could be funneled to the Chinese government, the



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georgia cook | junior

advice is most important now, they believe.

Green is trying to cut down the time he spends on the app. He's aware of the investigations, the risks, but other than the app being taken down, he — and all students interviewed for this story — see no end to TikTok's influence at East.

"I don't really know [what it would take to stop using TikTok]," junior Georgia Cook, who watches TikTok frequently, said. "But I mean, if that isn't going to stop me from watching TikTok, I don't know what will. It doesn't seem like it would affect me personally, even though they can access that information...I'm still going to watch them."

*information courtesy of oberlo and @smeharbinger's instagram