

Responsible Marketing

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Part one: 'How ethical is TikTok for marketing purposes?'

TikTok, is social media app where users (aged 13+) can create, watch and share short format videos on mobile devices. It was released in September 2016 by a Chinese technology company known as ByteDance, who is currently valued at 300 billion dollars. Its largest audience is Gen z's (13-28 year olds), with some popular videos being, lifestyle, comedy, lip syncing and dancing. Although TikTok is meant to be used as a creative outlet and entertainment, there are many concerns on how ethical it is as a whole, and from a marketing perspective.

(D'souza, 2025) (Thomala, 2024) (Dunn, 2025)

TikTok has been designed to be addictive through features like its “for you page” which is curated specifically to each user, created by their activity and interaction with pervious content. The “like, follow and comment” features on TikTok are key contributors to this addictive design and boost user's algorithm.

TikTok videos can be made up to 10 minutes long, with the average video being 35 seconds, making this content more attractive to users than long articles or videos. Multiple studies have shown that watching TikTok videos realises a surge of dopamine within a person's brain, which causes them to feel good. With videos being so short, a realise of dopamine can occur every few seconds between each scroll, leading to users wanting to scroll more to gain another dopamine rush, and therefore feeling better. This many seem positive; however, it can become addictive and reliant.

(Petrillo, 2021) (Qin et al., 2022) (Lown, 2024) (Matta, 2024) (Evitts, 2022)

TikTok have controls in place to try lower users screen time. Accounts for under 18-year-olds are automatically set to a 60-mintue daily screen time limit, if it is reached a passcode must be entered to regain access. All accounts can customise their screen time limits or have reminders when they have been on the app for too long. After 9pm accounts for 13–15-year-olds do not receive notifications and 10pm for aged 16-17s. These controls can help lower screen time if used efficiently, however, they can be turned off at any time (TikTok, 2023).

Many businesses use TikTok's addictive nature to help draw customers in and market towards them. This can be seen as unethical as it is further encouraging users to spend large amounts of time on the platform. However, this can be a helpful tool for businesses to personally connect and engage with customers, feel more authentic and relevant to customers, and mix humour and trends within their business. An example of a business using this successfully is Duolingo, a language learning app, who currently have 16.8 million followers and 463.1 million likes on their TikTok account as they have

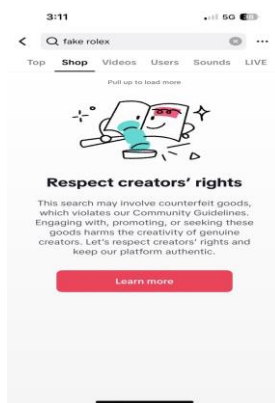
created an online persona that engages with users and leans into cultural trends (Duolingo, 2025) (Jarrar, 2024).

It is seen as unethical to market certain products to demographics such as children, as they can be inappropriate, harmful, or offensive to audiences. TikTok has regulations in place on products or services that are not allowed to be traded, marketed, provide access to, some being:

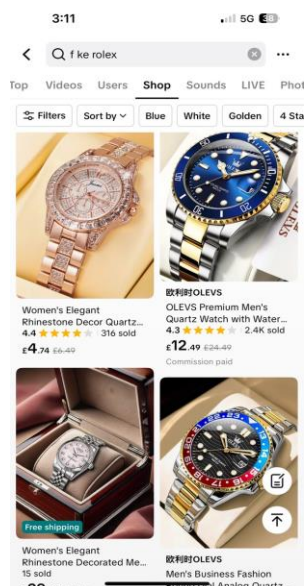
- Counterfeit or fake goods
- Sexual services
- Cold weapons
- Hate speech
- Gambling

(TikTok, n.d)

This type of content is monitored and will be removed if flagged. When searching for this prohibited content, it will block you from the search (shown in picture below)



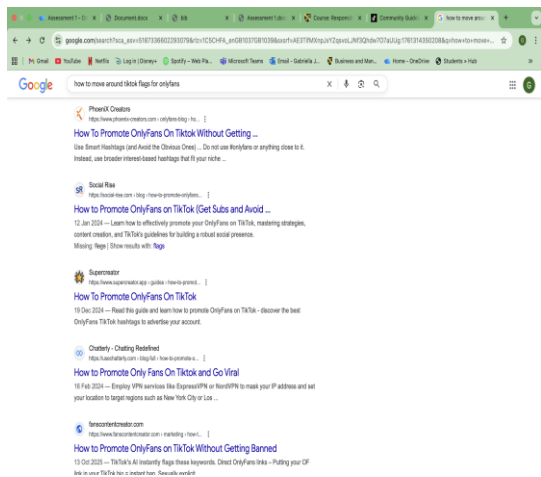
However, if you use key words, shortcuts or misspell, access is usually regranted (shown below).



Even without these key words content is usually available as there is only so much that can be monitored. The picture below shows a business marketing cold weapons (which is prohibited on TikTok), which was uploaded in 2024 and still has not been flagged.



Promoting sexual services is another big area of the app, again using common keywords to avoid being flagged. There are multiple websites and videos that show how to promote these services on TikTok and gain the right audiences on TikTok, as well as saying it is one of the best places to market these platforms.



This type of promotion may be seen as ethical as younger people should not be on the app; however, it is easy to lie about ages on TikTok, as well as under 18s able to be on the app. TikTok having controls in place does help monitor content however loopholes are found resulting in exposure of adult content to minors, glamorising drugs, weapons and professions, potential grooming tactics, and indirect links.

In September 2021, TikTok shop was launched within the app in the UK, which allows creators and businesses to sell and shop directly from TikTok. A feature of TikTok shop is that it you can link items to live streams and videos which then takes viewers straight to purchase (Simpson, 2021).

Influencers, or creators with a sufficient following are often asked to promote products, especially through TikTok shop, in exchange for commission from brands. This raises ethical concerns as promoters usually lack expertise in the product or knowledge of the product(s) and are simply doing it for the commission. This could lead to misleading advertisement or promoting something harmful without recognition (BBC Sounds, 2020).

Another ethical concern within marketing on TikTok is that advertisements are not always disclosed and users are not always able to tell if content is an advertisement or not as there are no specific tags or specification (University of Portsmouth, 2025) (Daniel Ershov, et al, 2025). If not specified promoters could be breaching Consumer Rights Act 2015 and advertising rules in place by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) (GOV, 2019) (Gov.uk, 2015).

Part two: **Digital media channels**

Facebook

There are 3.068 billion active users on Facebook, 56.7% being male and 43.3% female, with 25–34-year-olds being the biggest age group, making up 31.1% of users, with majority of users (378million) being located in India. Around 83% of businesses use

Facebook for marketing purpose, making them the most used form of social media marketing out of 6 others (Shepherd, 2023) (Dunn, 2025).



(Statista, 2024)

Since 25–34-year-olds are most active on Facebook, they are most likely to access marketing adverts on the platform. However, Facebook allows marketers to switch from their default audience suggestion and select the age and gender they want to specially target, and wont target outside of what they have selected, meaning majority of businesses could be marketing outside of the 25-24-year-old demographic.

Instagram

There are 2 billion active users on Instagram, 52.5% being male and 46.5% being female, with 25–34-year-olds being the biggest age group, with majority of users (362.9million) being located in India. Around 78% of businesses use Instagram for marketing purpose, making them the 2nd most used form of social media marketing out of 6 others. (Shepherd, 2025).

Similar to Facebook, marketers can choose their specific audience based on interests and demographics, they can also boost posts, reels, and stories to reach more users, and gain insight on their content to see how well content is received (Meta, 2022). Gen z and millennials being the most active users means that businesses with related products or services are most likely to market towards this demographic the most. (Meta, 2022).

TikTok

There are 2.14 billion active users on TikTok, 52% being female and 48% being male, with 18–24-year-olds being the biggest age group (36.2%), followed closely by 25–34-year-olds (33.9%), with majority of users (127.5%) being located in Indonesia, after being permanently banned in India. Around 26% of businesses use TikTok for marketing

purpose, making them the 6th most used form of social media marketing out of 6 others. TikTok allows marketers to reach certain demographics, device types, location, income, language, and interests. (Shewale, 2025) (Castmagic, 2024) (Shepherd, 2025).

18–34-year-olds are most likely to access marketing adverts on TikTok as they are the most active users and spend the most time on the app, meaning they are likely to scroll or view more ads than other age groups.

(TikTok, n.d) (TikTok for Business, 2022)

Snapchat

There are 463 million active users on Snapchat, 49.2 being male and the remaining being female, with 18–24-year-olds being the biggest age group, followed by 13–14-year-olds, with the majority of users (210.9 million) being located in India. 61% of 18–24-year-olds have said they have purchased something they saw on snapchat.

13–24-year-olds are most likely to access marketing adverts on TikTok as they are the most active users and are most likely going to be exposed to more adverts due to the time spent on the app, and businesses knowing that this age group is on the app the most.

(Shepherd, 2024) (Sheikh, 2025)

Part three: **TikTok advertising**

A TikTok advert by Dr Squatch, a men natural soap and deodorant brand, caused a lot of public controversy. The ad and product they were promoting was with American celebrity actress Sydney Sweeney, selling “Sydney's Bathwater Bliss” soap bar.

TikTok ad, and ad that influenced the product:

<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNd3Nyx5m/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEBCRSV75Vs&t=3s>

Sweeney has spoken out before on how she feels dehumanised and people don't know her true self over the characters she plays, once stating that; “People feel connected and free to be able to speak about me in whatever way they want, because they believe that I've signed my life away. That I am not on a human level anymore” (Clark, 2024).

This sparked one side of the controversy from this advert as she has previously spoken out about not wanting to be sexualised but objectively doing it in this campaign, and others. Sweeney has also face backlash on an American Eagle campaign she was a part

of, that was said to have racist undertones and regressive sexualisation of women, as well as Saturday Night Live skits also focused on her appearance.

Viewers have said they think the ad has set them back years by leaning into misogyny and objectifying women for the male gaze. One person saying, “This feels like an ad straight out of the 1950s... as a young person, I was shocked and disappointed to see this kind of advertising still around in 2025” (Edwards, 2025).

There's also the issue that the advert was promoted via TikTok. It is a sexually suggestive advert that could be argued should not be seen by the younger demographic on TikTok, it could also breach TikTok's advertising regulations.

The other side of the controversy says it's empowering as Sweeney has expressed that people should “flaunt what they got and feel good because you shouldn't have to apologise or hide or cover up in any room” and “people think, ‘Ah, she’s a sex symbol,’ or ‘She’s leaning into that,’ I’m like, ‘No, I just feel good and I’m doing it for myself and I feel strong’.” (Battison, 2025).

I believe this advert is effective as it uses emotions like, disgust, confusion, anger, lust as a stimulus for sales. The backlash this advert raised got people talking about the business on different platforms and visiting the businesses advert, gaining 10.6 million views on their TikTok. The exposure this advert gained could have brought potential customers to the business, by reaching the target audience for this product even when people are talking bad, because they essentially are not the target. P.T. Barnum once said, “there's no such thing as bad publicity”, which is exactly what this campaign demonstrates as the product sold out in minutes, crashed Dr Squatch’s website, increased revenue, created demand and increased brand awareness (Webster, 2025) (Vismara, 2024).

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