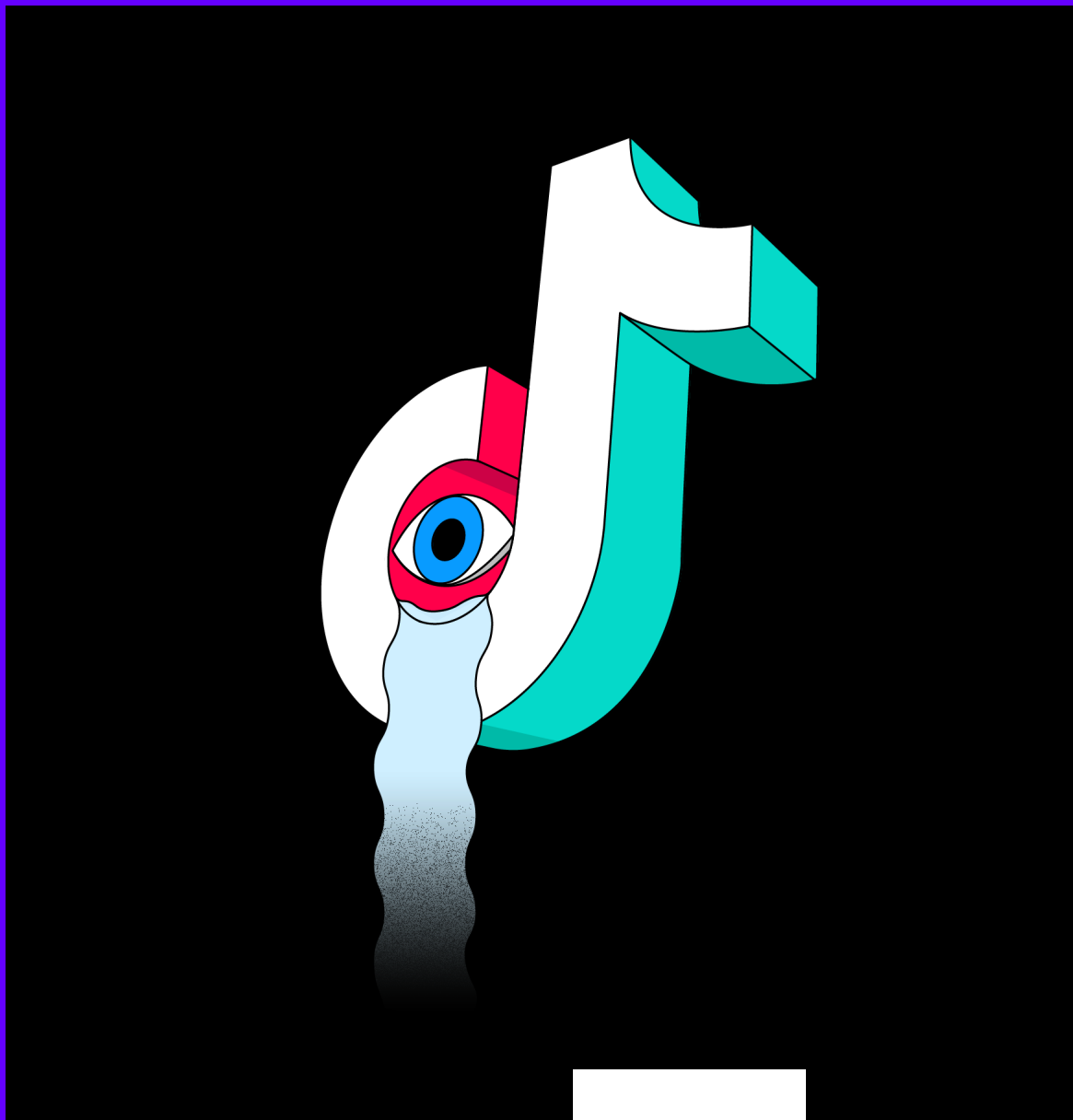


Suicide, Incels, and Drugs: How TikTok's deadly algorithm harms kids

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A report by

EKO

eko.org

People and planet, over profit



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Content Warning and Helpful Resources

This report includes explicit language and content related to the following items which could be distressing or triggering to readers:

- Mental health, including self harm and suicide
- Violence
- Violent misogyny, including sexual assault
- Drugs and addiction

If you find any of the content discussed in this report upsetting, you may find the following resources helpful.

If you or someone you know may be considering suicide, contact the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) at 1-800-273-8255 (en español: 1-888-628-9454; deaf and hard of hearing: 1-800-799-4889) or the [Crisis Text Line](#) by texting HOME to 741741.

U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Helpline, 1-800-662-HELP (4357) and 1-800-487-4889 is a confidential, free, 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year, information service, in English and Spanish, for individuals and family members facing mental and/or substance use disorders. This service provides referrals to local treatment facilities, support groups, and community-based organizations.

Also visit the [online treatment locator](#), or send your zip code via text message: 435748 (HELP4U) to find help near you. Read more about the [HELP4U text messaging service](#).

Introduction

In recent years, child experts have been raising the alarm around the mental health crisis affecting young people across the U.S. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in the last decade rates of depression and anxiety have rocketed among children, including feelings of persistent sadness and hopelessness, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors.¹ The American Psychological Association (APA) has noted the contributing role of social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat in this mental health crisis, pointing out that the developmental stage of children – whose brains are wired to seek attention and approval from their peers – makes them particularly vulnerable to the pressures of social media.² Earlier this year the US Surgeon General also singled out social media platforms for their adverse impacts on kids.³

The spiraling mental health epidemic is hitting young girls particularly hard. Nearly 3 in 5 teen girls in the U.S. report feeling persistently sad or hopeless, according to CDC data, representing a nearly 60% increase on a decade ago and the highest level reported in that decade.⁴ The impact of social media on a kid's body image is well documented, with young users reporting that social media makes them feel bad about their bodies.⁵ In a leaked internal research report, Facebook admitted that its platform makes body issues worse for 1 in 3 girls.⁶ An experiment on Instagram found that simply viewing retouched selfies, versus edited ones, directly harmed the body image of teen girls.⁷

While young girls are bombarded by content fuelled by a business model that pushes a

dangerous and unhealthy body image, young boys are being drowned by highly misogynistic and oftentimes violent content. This includes content from the incel movement, (short for "involuntary celibate"), an online community who self-identify as unable to get a romantic or sexual partner despite desiring one. Reddit recognized the toxicity of the incel movement and banned it from the platform in 2017. But users quickly migrated to YouTube⁸, and as this research shows incel content is also widespread on TikTok. This content is grounded in a highly misogynistic ideology that has resulted in real-world violence, including mass killings in both the U.S. and U.K.⁹

While these problems are common to all social media platforms, this investigation focuses specifically on TikTok, which has fast become the social media 'home' of kids. The platform now has over 1 billion monthly users¹⁰, a third of whom are estimated to be under 14¹¹, but despite its size very little is known about the algorithm and recommendation system that serves up curated content to such vast numbers of children. What we do know is that the platform is highly precise in tracking a users' actions, swipes, and movements, including factors such as likes, comments, and time spent watching content to calibrate its algorithm¹² and funnel content to users through its For You Page. According to leaked company documents, the algorithm's "ultimate goal" is to optimize "retention" (a user coming back) and "time spent".

In an effort to dig deeper into the anatomy of TikTok's algorithm, Ekō created a set of accounts registered to fictitious 13-year olds, and monitored how quickly the platform's recommendation



system would serve up dangerous suicide and incel content to our pretend kids. We chose to focus on suicide and incel content as it is unambiguously harmful content, which clearly breaches TikTok's Community guidelines. The results were damning, demonstrating how TikTok's algorithm aggressively pushes harmful content to young users. Ekō's researchers also identified a network of harmful suicide, incel, and drug content easily accessible to a 13-year-old account, some of which can be found in as little as three clicks.

Key findings

► The research shows that just after 10 minutes on TikTok, with low-level engagement with harmful content, effectively triggered TikTok's algorithm to target our researcher's 13-year-old accounts with content explicitly promoting suicide and violence.

► In total the hashtags that held suicide content readily available for children on the platform amassed over 1.43M posts and 8.8B views.

► In total the hashtags that held incel content readily available for children on the platform had racked up over 530K posts and over 10B views.

Much of this content breaches TikTok's own Community Guidelines. According to TikTok, the platform does not allow content depicting, promoting, normalizing, or glorifying activities that could lead to suicide, self-harm, or disordered eating.¹³ Also, hateful ideologies that praise, promote, glorify, or support misogyny are also not allowed on the platform.¹⁴

The findings also highlight how TikTok's attempts to address concerns about its impact on younger users are woefully inadequate. Earlier this month, the company announced that it would place an automatic one hour screen time limit on under 18's accounts. However, not only are users able to turn off this setting easily, but our researchers were bombarded with a slew of extreme content promoting suicide and violence within ten minutes of logging on.

The dangerous content and function of TikTok's manipulative algorithm exposed by this research is not unique. In fact, the findings and recommendations from this research have been made countless times to other social media platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook, whose business models and algorithms work similarly. Policymakers, civil society, and whistleblowers have all called for tough new laws to rein in Big Tech's harmful business model which is driving the disinformation crisis. Right now, multiple states are debating or considering introducing specific age-appropriate laws to protect young people online. This is just a first, but important, step to mitigate the harmful impacts of these platforms.

Findings in detail

Suicide

► TikTok's For You Page automatically served up highly viral and dangerous suicide content including videos with guns being loaded and text suggesting suicide, alongside comments listing users' exact dates for their own self-harm or suicide.

► TikTok's For You Page was filled with videos promoting dismal and otherwise hopeless content and commentary around death, toxic relationships, sexual abuse, depression, and domestic violence.

► TikTok's For You Page served up content celebrating a popular 4chan and far-right hero's suicide act with multiple comments from users mentioning their hope of replicating his suicide.

Suicide Hashtags	Posts	Views
#sh	926,000	6,000,000,000
#imdone	230,000	1,000,000,000
#hurting	121,000	725,000,000
#realrx	22,000	305,000,000
#sadslideshow	17,000	278,000,000
#ihatemylife	66,000	224,000,000

#wubba lubba dub dub	14,000	87,000,000
#ihatemyself	17,000	68,000,000
#realslideshow	5,000	58,000,000
#hatemyself	6,000	23,000,000
#sewerslidall	2,000	7,000,000
#lmgonnaendit	697	6,000,000
#gonnaendit	619	5,000,000
#canttakethisanyomore	860	4,000,000
#suwerslide	246	2,000,000
#sewerslid3	637	2,000,000
#killingms	91	2,000,000
#gonnaenditall	242	1,000,000
#howtoendit	20	546,000
#sueofside	37	273,000
#abouttodoit	44	69,000
#depreshun	4000	37,000

Overdose

- Multiple videos were found on TikTok offering advice regarding at-home suicide with videos suggesting, “5 ways to end it without feeling any pain”.
- Other videos gave advice for at-home concoctions and even home footage of self-harm, including a potentially lethal dose of salt and water in order to induce organ failure.

Incel

- TikTok’s For You Page automatically showed violent incel and other “manosphere” content to children, including content that suggests suicide.
- Multiple videos on the platform celebrated mass shooter Elliot Rodgers and his manifesto, and Andrew Tate. Another video made reference to lethal weapons in their school locker, suggesting a school shooting.

► TikTok’s algorithm served up highly misogynistic content that amplified hateful messages and rhetoric suggesting “women are evil” and that “modern women are cowards”. TikTok’s algorithm pushed grim commentary around isolation, loneliness, and failed relationships that seem to target young men and boys.

Incel Hashtags	Posts	Views
#sigmamale	177,000	5,000,000,000
#alphamale	111,000	2,000,000,000
#highvalueman	24,000	559,000,000
#redpilltiktok	24,000	465,000,000
#redpil	18,000	385,000,000
#Hypergamy	10,000	294,000,000
#modernwomen	13,000	263,000,000
#bluepill	16,000	258,000,000
#manosphere	12,000	227,000,000
#mra	56,000	126,000,000
#sigmagrindset	2,000	57,000,000
#blackpil	891	27,000,000
#sigmareal	351	17,000,000
#bluepil	783	14,000,000
#bluepillled	562	9,000,000
#inc3l	301	4,000,000
#mra	56,000	126,000,000
#manosphere	12,000	227,000,000

Drugs

- Ekō researchers were able to locate at least 18 accounts that were selling cocaine, prescription pills such as Xanax, Percocet, and OxyContin, as well as, MDMA, LSD, and marijuana on the platform.
- One account pushed users to a Telegram group which was selling “M30s”, the street name for imitation Oxycodone pills which have routinely led to fentanyl overdoses and death.



Ekō researchers set up nine new accounts, and all accounts selected a date of birth which informed TikTok that the user was 13 years old, the youngest age to gain access to the platform to post videos and comment. Ekō researchers used one of the 13-year-old accounts to identify popular posts pushing harmful suicide, incel and ‘manosphere’, and drug content on the platform. All of these posts were found readily available on the platform, many even on the first page of the “Top” suggested videos for specific hashtags, proving that a user does not need to dig into the darkest corners of the platform to find dangerous content.

After identifying over 180 problematic videos found on the platform using the 13-year-old account, Ekō researchers then created multiple sets of ten videos, for suicide and incel content, pulled from the list of 180 videos. The researcher then watched and engaged with the sample of ten videos on a brand new 13-year-old account. Researchers liked, bookmarked, and watched the ten videos all the way through in order to optimize time on the content. Researchers did not share, comment, or repost any of the videos in order to keep the interaction on the videos limited and to test how powerfully the algorithm operates.

After watching and engaging with the ten sample videos in under ten minutes, researchers then began tracking the content served up on the For You Page by the platform. The researchers spent the next hour tracking 50 videos and immediately downloaded and stored the content. The researchers did not like, comment, or engage with any of the videos served by the platform. The researchers only watched problematic content all the way through.

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and loneliness. One comment from a TikTok user mentions that the acronym stands for “Realize Everyone Always Leaves”. Others on the platform mention that the comment is coupled with parenthesis and text to explain or unmask the user's real pain. Throughout the research, the “real” comment was coupled with specific date, times, and locations for suggested suicides.

● 'FEELING LIKE JOEY' VIDEO



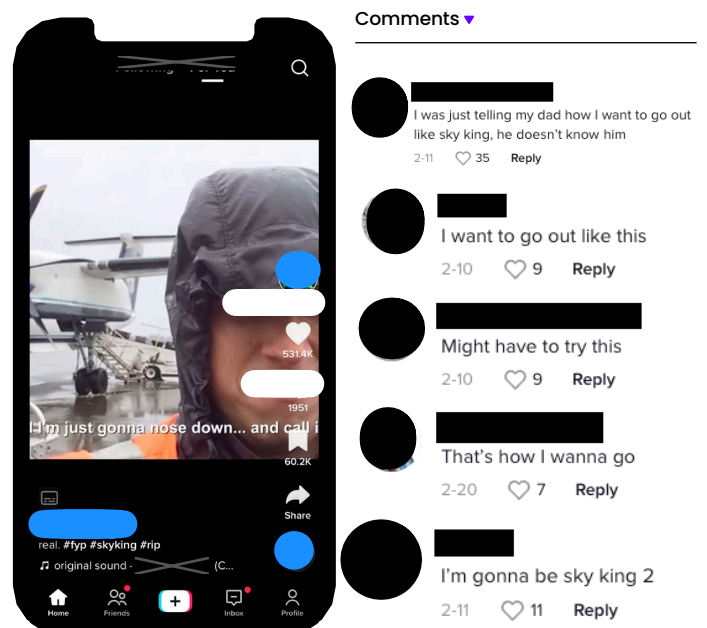
● 'REAL' COMMENTS



Another video promoted on the For You Page to one of the accounts celebrated a popular 4chan¹⁵ and far-right hero, “Sky King”¹⁶, and praised his suicide act where he stole a plane from the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport and crashed it after doing aerial stunts. The video was coupled with text that read “embracing female rage” with two women beating a dummy, followed by audio from “Sky King’s” suicide. **The video was viewed more than 2.2 million times and had over 4,64K likes and 1,582 comments and was shared over 1,223 times.** Multiple comments on the video glorified “Sky King’s” act and users mentioned their hope of replicating his suicide.

Beyond videos with explicit mention of suicide or self-harm, there were many other videos that are part of an ecosystem of dark and depressing content around themes of death, toxic relationships, sexual abuse, anxiety, and domestic violence, which are then amplified by other users in the posts’ comments. Many of the videos contained a common thread relaying undercurrents of loneliness, pain, and oftentimes stark commentary around mental health crises, such as depression, anxiety, and self-harm.

● 'SKY KING'S' VIDEO





Looking at these videos in isolation might not raise concern, considering many do not break any of TikTok's community guidelines. However, when looked at within the context of the research and an attempt to better understand the anatomy of TikTok's algorithm, these videos point to the dark shadows of TikTok's For You Page. The algorithm seemed to be chasing our researcher with content to keep them on the platform. In this case, the content fed by TikTok's algorithm was overwhelmingly depressing, nihilistic and otherwise hopeless. Even employees at TikTok have been disturbed by the app's push towards depressive content, that could include self-harm.¹⁷

This research shows that just ten minutes on TikTok, with only low-level engagement with suicide content, effectively triggers TikTok's algorithm to target young users with content explicitly promoting suicide, as well as content pushing heartbreak, depression, and self-harm. TikTok and other toxic social media platforms work to keep users on the application as long as possible, tracking their actions, swipes, and data which they then monetize with targeted ads. In this example, TikTok's algorithm's kept the researcher on the platform by aggressively pushing a catalog of depressive and suicidal content, sending a hypothetically vulnerable 13-year-old further down the rabbit hole.

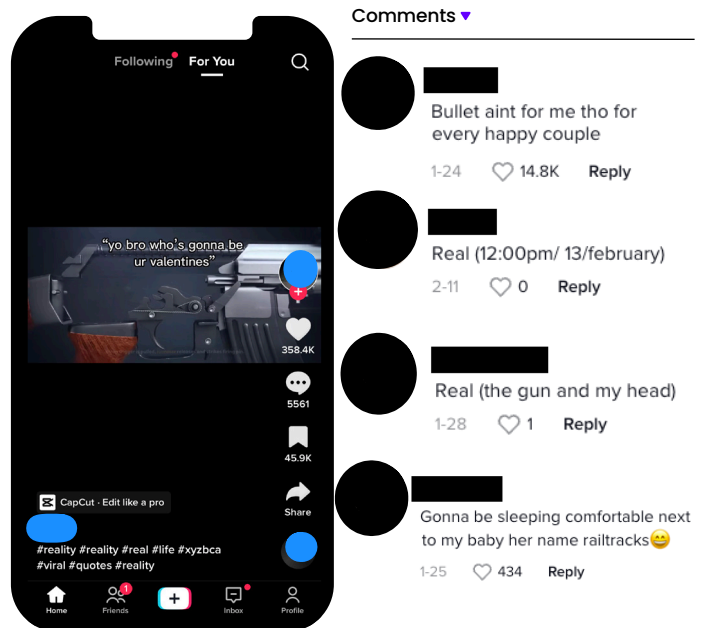
Suicide content readily available to children on TikTok

Besides experimenting with TikTok's algorithm to highlight the role in which the highly viral For You Page plays in serving up harmful content, this research also investigated the readily available suicide content that the researcher's 13-year-old account could easily access. An Ekō researcher identified at least 22 hashtags that held suicide content. Some of these hashtags are purposely misspelled in order to easily get around TikTok's banned content, for example, #suwerslide and #sewerslidall (for suicide), and #depreshun (for depression), while others are much more explicit, such as, #howtoendit, #ihatemylife, #abouttodoit. Using TikTok's Hashtag tool, Ekō was able to get insights into how many posts and views each hashtag received globally over the last three years. **In total the hashtags that held suicide content readily available for kids on the platform amassed over 1.43M posts and 8.8B views since TikTok launched.**

Many of the videos available on the platform were deeply disturbing and used explicit language and imagery associated with suicide, including by gunshot, hanging, and overdose through prescription pills as well as household concoctions, such as salt water. Once again, the comments in these videos were filled with users' own suggested suicide dates and remarks in support of self-harm.

One highly engaged video showed an AK-47 being loaded and fired with text that read, "yo bro who is gonna be ur valentines", suggesting a suicide on Valentine's day. **The video was viewed 1.7M times, had 358.4K likes, and had over 5K comments.**

● 'YO BRO WHO IS GONNA BE UR VALENTINES' VIDEO



Another video had text that read, "5 ways to end it without feeling any pain:/". **The video had 24K views, 690 likes, and over 200 comments**, many giving advice on specific ways to commit suicide, including through common household items, and even suggesting to drink a lethal dose of salt and water over a period of days in order to induce a heart attack.

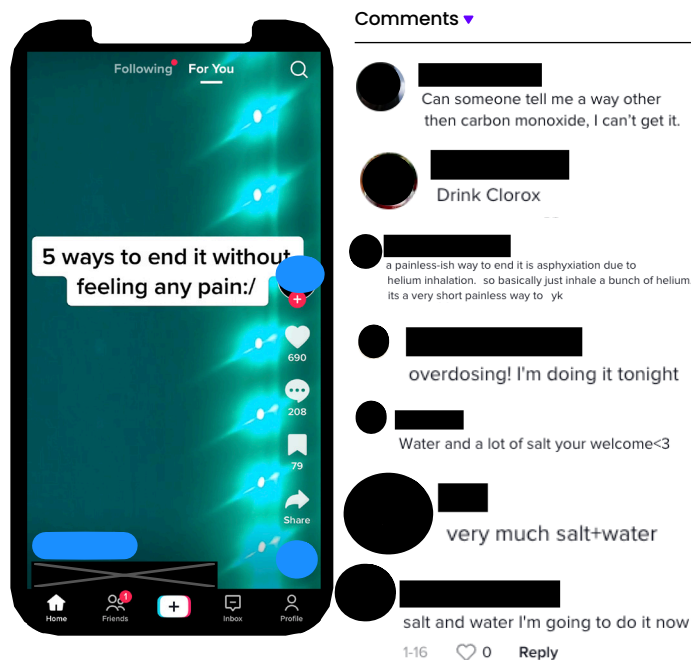
After only a few clicks, an Ekō researcher was able to find another video again suggesting a lethal concoction of salt and water with caption text that

reads, "an interesting thing is the salt and water drink, i think i'm gonna try it...". **The video had over 300K views, 66K likes, and over 550 comments.**

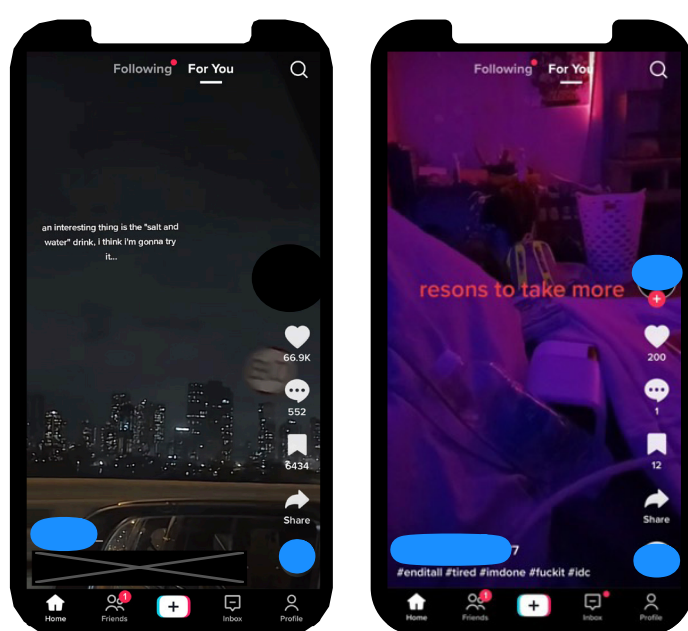
Another [video](#), which has been removed before the completion of this research, had text that read "yk

[you know] salt water can kill you right? Reason to take more.", with video of the creator pointing to a water bottle assumed to be filled with salt water alongside hashtags #enditall and #imdone.

● '5 WAYS TO END IT WITHOUT FEELING ANY PAIN' VIDEO



● 'SALT WATER' VIDEOS



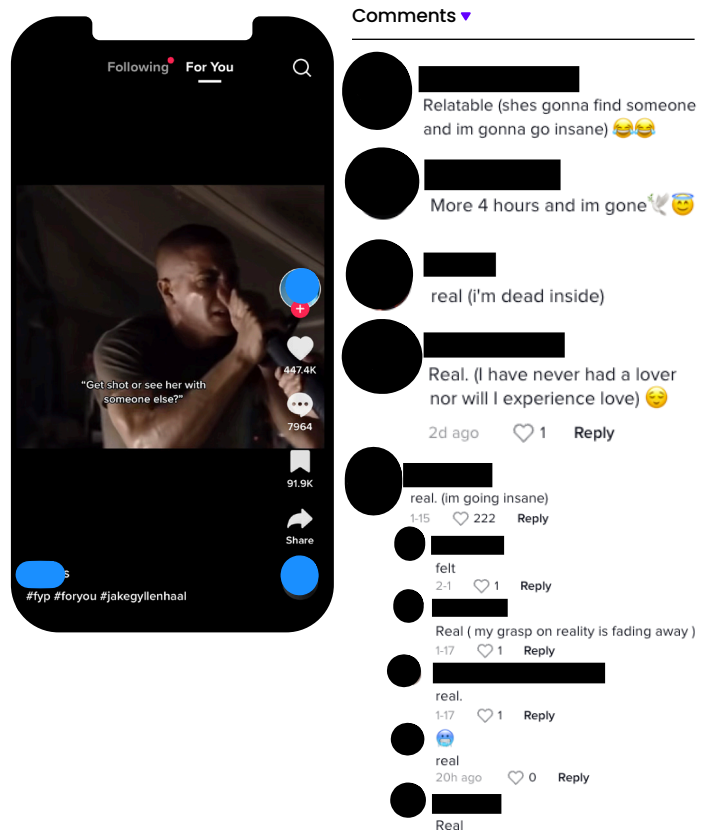
TikTok's algorithm pushing incel content to children

The incel subculture is a part of the 'manosphere'¹⁸, an umbrella movement of interconnected misogynistic communities. Incel communities began on online channels and forums such as Reddit and 4chan. However, in recent years they have begun successfully using and building their networks on more mainstream social media platforms, such as YouTube and TikTok.¹⁹ Experts fear that the fast rise of the global incel culture could provoke terrorism and further violence.²⁰

An Ekō researcher set up a 13-year-old account on TikTok to test if the platform's algorithm would automatically serve up incel content after just ten minutes of engagement with incel content easily found on the platform. Almost immediately, TikTok's For You Page began showing incel and other 'manosphere' content to the 13-year-old's account, including content with incel and 'manosphere' specific hashtags such as #sigma, #alphamale, and #modernwomen, as well as, celebrated icons and characters within the incel movement.

One of these [videos](#) (removed before the completion of the research) includes a scene from a Jake Gyllenhaal film, whose films have been popular amongst incels, where he is seen with a rifle in his mouth saying, "Shoot me. Shoot me in the f***** face.", alongside text that reads, "Get shot or see her with someone else?" hinting at a suggested suicide attempt. The video had massive engagement, including over **440K likes, over 2.1M views, 7.2K comments, and over 11K shares**. The comments were inundated with support for the suggested suicide and users shared commentary about their loneliness, many suggesting "they feel dead inside". One commenter even suggested

'GET SHOT OR SEE HER WITH SOMEONE ELSE?' VIDEO



their own suicide in the next four hours. A similar comment trend was found on suicide research where users posted "real" with more commentary on their pain placed in parenthesis, pointing at an overlap between both suicide and incel communities on TikTok.

Other toxic content from influencers in the 'manosphere' and incel communities were also



automatically served by TikTok's algorithm. One video suggested that "Men need to wake up. Women are evil." Another, from the same TikTok influencer, suggests that "Women don't know how to respect men because of their emotions." Another video showed an interview by Kevin Samuels, a popular influencer in the 'manosphere' movement, where he highlights that "Modern women are cowards". Kevin Samuels died in May 2022, but earned millions of social media subscribers on his controversial and misogynistic views, becoming a godfather figure for the "manosphere"

● 'KEVIN SAMUELS' COMMENTS



This guy is a genius. He ain't dead. Great soul never dies.

2-6 331 Reply



His legacy lives in us who learned from him and others like him in the manosphere.

2-6 3 Reply

community.²¹ The comments from these videos were filled with hateful messages that further amplified this harmful narrative and glorified Kevin Samuels.

Beyond content explicitly tied to the incel movement, a majority of the content presented by the algorithm was grim commentary around failed relationships and painful breakups that seem to target young men and boys who are vulnerable to joining or going deeper into the incel or 'manosphere' communities. Many of these videos highlighted massive pain and isolation. Individually, these videos could be seen as harmless, however, when looked at collectively, this targeting of vulnerable users with an onslaught of oppressive and distressing content is problematic. One of these video's captions read, "how many times did you think about her today". Another video's text read, "Take me back to when you were obsessed with me, when I was all you wanted." A third video's text read, "me whenever I see that weak version of me that I killed is trying to come back" alongside footage of a videogame character repeatedly shooting a gun at someone.

Incel and 'manosphere' content readily available to children on TikTok

Our research also found that TikTok is filled with problematic content related to the incel and 'manosphere' communities that was easily accessible for a 13-year-old account. There are a number of incel specific hashtags and channels which regularly share content pushing blame on women and society for their lack of romantic success. An Ekō researcher identified at least 18 hashtags that held incel or 'manosphere' content. Some of these hashtags made explicit mention to incel and 'manosphere' vocabulary, such as #redpill, #alphamale, #highvalueman. Using TikTok's 'Hashtag' tool²² Ekō was able to get insights into just how far-reaching incel and 'manosphere' content was able to reach on the platform.

In total the hashtags that held this content readily available for children on the platform amassed over 530K posts and over 10B views since TikTok launched.

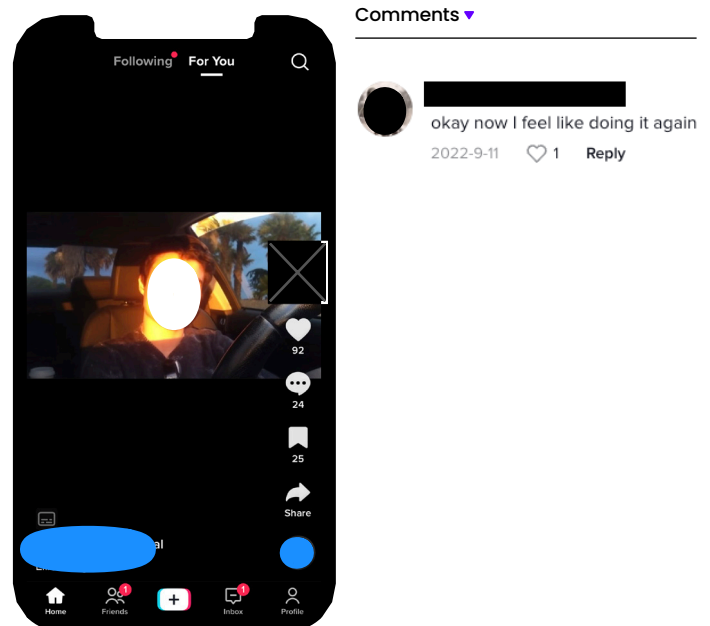
On the platform it was extremely easy for our researcher to find videos that celebrated individuals popular in the incel and 'manosphere' communities, such as Elliott Rodgers²³, who killed six people in a stabbing and shooting spree in Isla Vista, California, in May 2014, and Andrew Tate, the 36-year-old retired kickboxer and online influencer who was arrested on allegations of human trafficking, rape and organised crime.²⁴

One video celebrated Elliott Rodgers with video text that read, "To my fav Murderer" alongside footage of his video manifesto a day before his killing spree.

Another video showed a longer version of his video manifesto, where he is seen saying, "Tomorrow is the day of retribution....If I can't have you, girls, I will destroy you." Together **the two videos had over 2.9M views and 197K likes**. One of the comments from the first video read, "okay now I feel like doing it again".

Other videos showed content containing guns and made reference to violence, as well as suicide. For example, one video which had #sigma and #sigmagrindset hashtags, which are commonly

● 'ELLIOTT RODGERS' VIDEO





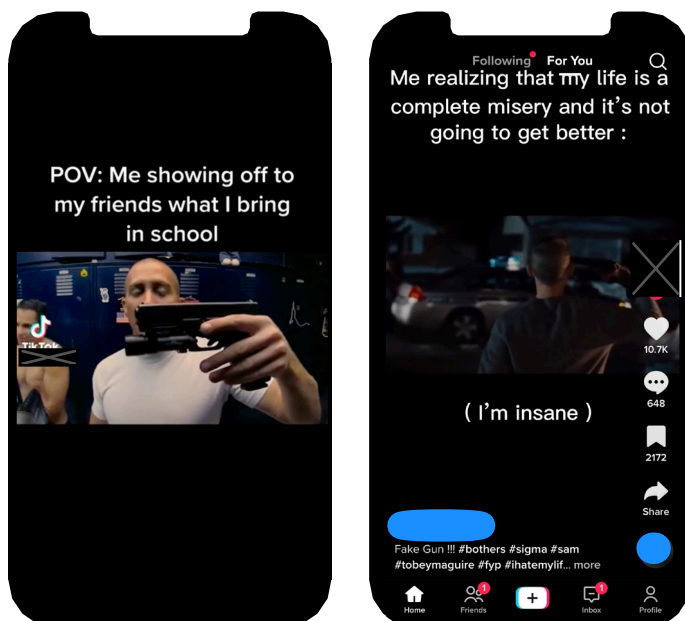
used by the incel community to praise the lone-wolf alpha male representation. The video showed a clip from the film "Brothers" where there is a suicide attempt alongside text that reads, "Me realizing that my life is a complete misery and it's not going to get better: (I'm insane)". Another video, which was taken off of the platform before the completion of this report, had the hashtag #sigmagrindset alongside video of guns, knives, and ammunition from the film "End of Watch" with text that read, "POV [point of view]: Me showing off to my friends what I bring in school", hinting at bringing lethal weapons inside school.

Other videos showed and glorified controversial 'manosphere' influencer Andrew Tate. One such video shows Andrew Tate smoking a cigar and jumping into a pool with text that reads, "This man came from absolutely nowhere and turned boys into men!". The video had over **10M views, 906K likes, and over 4K comments**. The video had massive engagement, including comments filled with support of Andrew Tate.

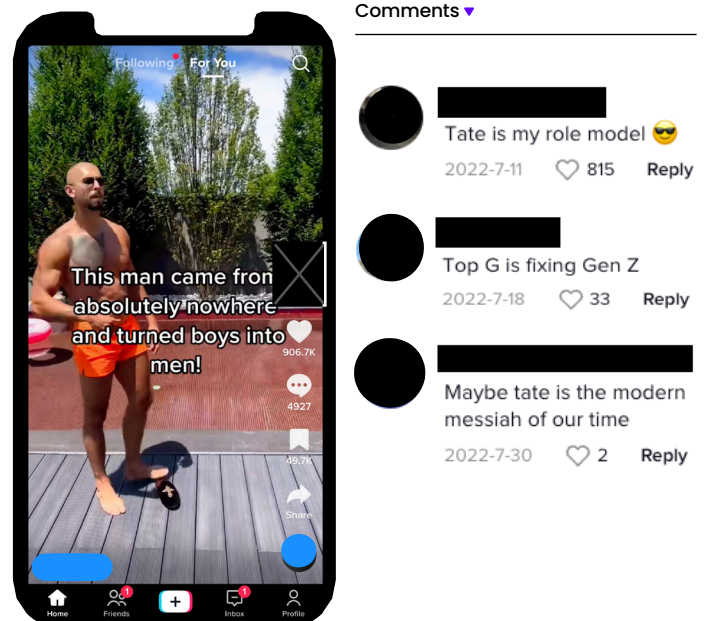
Another video accessed on the 13-year-old account was of Andrew Tate encouraging viewers to join the **the red pill movement**, a term coming from the film the "Matrix" in which the pill symbolizes truth and self-knowledge as opposed to ignorance, represented by the blue pill. The video was removed from the platform before the completion of this research, however, it had text that read, "Red Pill Is Your Escape" and consisted of 39 seconds of Andrew Tate telling viewers that in order to be saved "you must be willing to take the red pill" from him.

Proponents of the 'red pill' movement within incel and 'manosphere' communities claim to be fighting against feminism and a belief that women have been given far too much power. According to these communities, by taking the red pill, one is going on the offensive against an unfair worldview where women can choose any man to have sex with. Men in the red pill movement attempt to offset this alleged reality by seeking and performing within hyper-masculine definitions

● 'SIGMA' VIDEOS

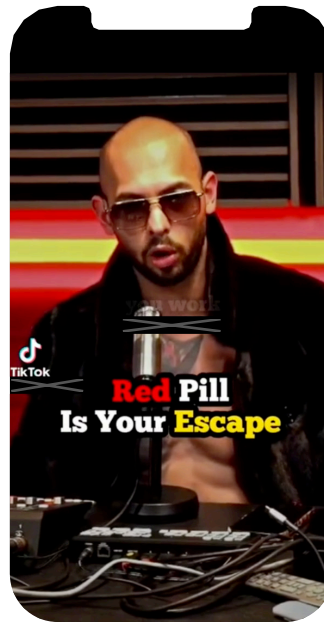


● 'THIS MAN CAME FROM ABSOLUTELY NOWHERE' ANDREW TATE VIDEO



of physical attraction in order to get women. The red pill movement has been criticized as being misogynistic and extremely bigoted, and at times violent.²⁵ For example Elliott Rodgers, self-identified as having taken "the red pill".²⁶

● 'RED PILL IS YOUR ESCAPE' ANDREW TATE VIDEO



Drugs readily available to children on TikTok

In just a few hours, Ekō researchers were able to locate at least 18 accounts that were selling cocaine, prescription pills, such as Xanax, Percocet, and OxyContin, as well as, MDMA, LSD, and marijuana on the platform. The researchers were able to find these accounts using a 13-year-old account and through directly searching on TikTok. For others, researchers entered “TikTok buy online acid” in Google’s search engine and within three clicks they were able to reach a seller’s account. Most of the accounts routed a user to Telegram, Snapchat, or Instagram to direct message the user in order to actually purchase the drugs. According to TikTok’s Community Guidelines, the platform does not allow the depiction, promotion, or trade of drugs or other controlled substances.²⁷

One [video](#) was seen encouraging users to join a Telegram group which was selling “M30s”, the street name for imitate Oxycodone pills which have routinely contained fentanyl – even one pill can result in overdose and death, a tragedy that has been rising in recent years. More young people are dying from fentanyl than ever before, and it was the cause of 77% of drug deaths among teenagers.²⁸

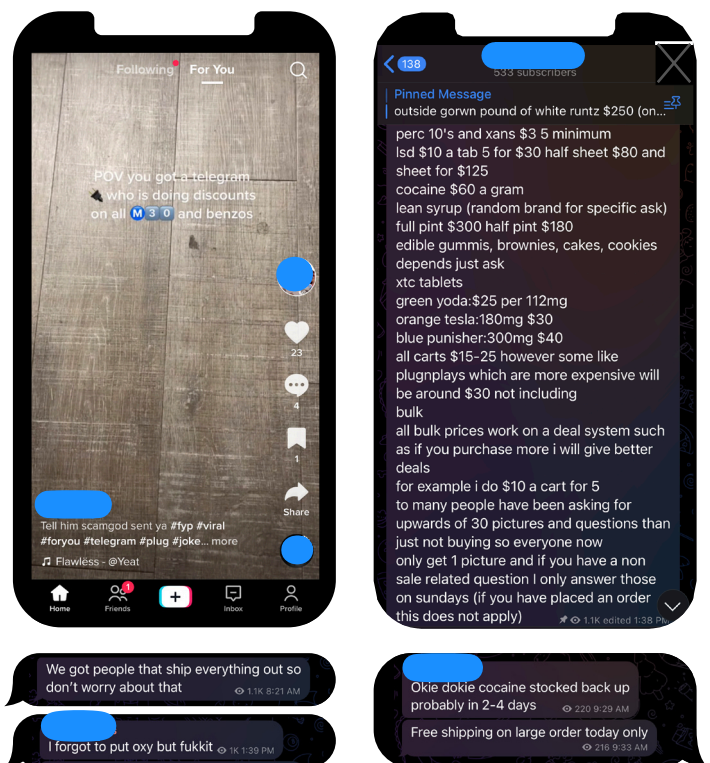
An Ekō researcher entered the Telegram group shared by the user and found an entire menu of illicit drugs for sale, including Percocet, Xanax, LSD, Cocaine, hydrocodone, marijuana, and MDMA. The seller ships internationally and has over 530 subscribers to the Telegram channel.

Another [video](#) shared a Telegram channel to purchase MDMA pills and cocaine by using their common street emojis.²⁹ The video had

the hashtags #pingtok and #rave (“pinger” is another street name for MDMA or Ecstasy). An Ekō researcher entered the Telegram channel and was given the option to direct message the seller to purchase drugs.

Another [video](#) was found selling high dosage Ecstasy pills known by their street name as “Blue Punishers”. The pill has been reported to contain three times the usual dose of MDMA and has

‘M30 AND BENZOS’ VIDEO

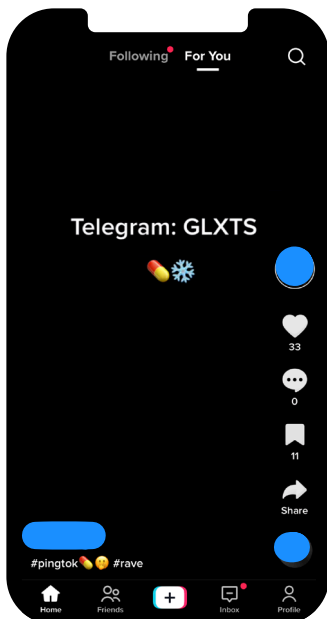




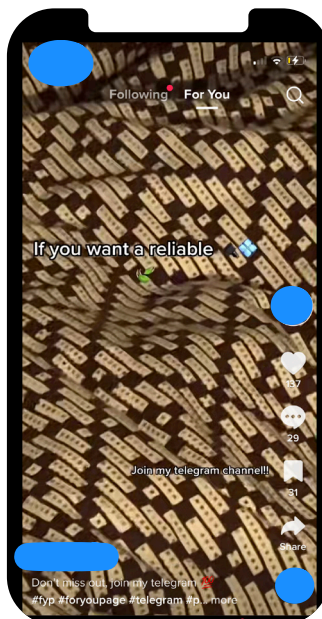
resulted in serious harm, including the overdose and death of teenagers.³⁰ The problem of easily accessible drugs isn't unique to TikTok. Research by the Tech Transparency Project found that children as young as 13 on Instagram are able to find deadly

drugs for sale "in just two clicks."³¹ In their own tests, the Organization for Social Media Safety found that it takes approximately three minutes to find a drug dealer on social media—and receive a menu of drugs for sale.



● 'TELEGRAM: GLXTS' MDMA PINGER VIDEO



● 'IF YOU WANT A RELIABLE...' BLUE PUNISHER VIDEO



Comments ▼

-  Blue punishers?
2-7 Reply
-  **Creator**
Yeah bro
2-7 Reply

Conclusion

This research shows how easy it is to trigger TikTok's algorithm to serve up violent and harmful content to its youngest users. A new user only has to watch and lightly engage in a handful of problematic posts before TikTok's powerful recommender system begins to target their For You Page, sending the user down a rabbit hole of more extreme content. In the case of this experiment, lightly engaging in posts around the themes of suicide, depression or incel-related content, led to a catalog of these types of posts flooding the researchers' accounts, to the near exclusion of other types of posts.

These findings are not unique to TikTok – toxic algorithms that amplify harmful content is a problem on all major social media platforms. Underlying this is a flawed business model that has one goal – to keep users on the platform as long as possible, so that the company can collect as much user data as possible and then use this to run highly targeted ads. This incentive to maximize 'engagement' on their platforms, means that recommender systems amplify content they believe will be most engaging, regardless of the wider impact of that content. In recent years, harmful content promoting political insurrection, eating disorders, suicide, and far-right militias have become rampant on social media platforms.

Despite growing political and public concern, platforms have played down the scale of the problem, making minor tweaks to their policies

and practices to deflect criticism but leaving the fundamental problems untouched.

Overhauling Big Tech's business model is imperative if we hope to turn the tide on the mental health crisis engulfing children and teens. Platforms like TikTok, YouTube and Instagram have shown that they are unwilling to take action to protect younger users on their platforms, and lawmakers must urgently step in.

Recommendations

► Support State Age Appropriate Design Code Bills

Young people deserve better and this year, state lawmakers in the U.S. have an opportunity to safeguard young people's data privacy. These bills will confront Big Tech's harmful business model by making sure that kids can not be targeted with harmful content. Last year, California became the first state to pass their age-appropriate design code into law, not only making platforms safer for children, but with positive ripple effects for everyone in California.³² This year, at least five other states proposed their own age appropriate design codes and lawmakers must make sure that they pass.

► Back the Platform Accountability and Transparency Act

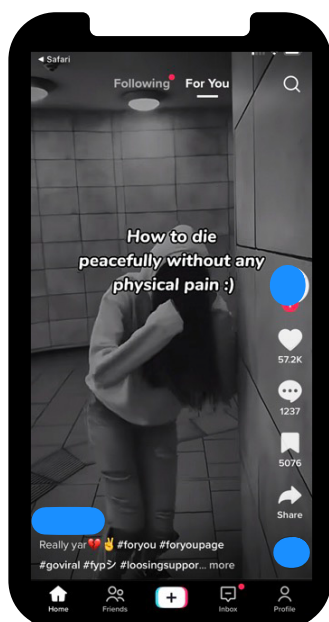
This would require platforms to provide data on viral content, moderation decisions and digital



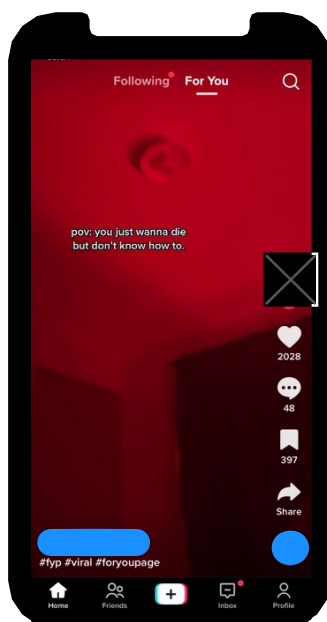
advertising.

► **Congress must pass comprehensive laws to rein in Big Tech using the European Union's Digital Services Act as a blueprint**

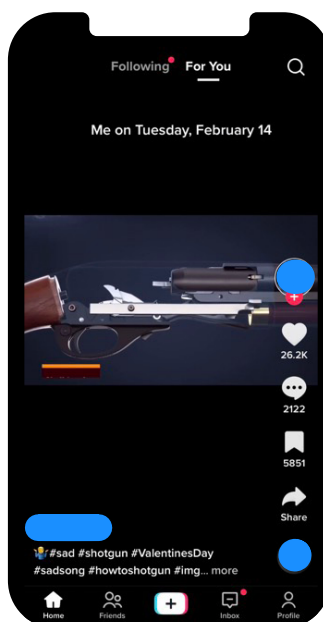
This would include provisions for more transparency around recommender systems and online advertising, and a risk assessment by platforms to assess the systemic risks posed by their products, for example with regard to public health and gender based violence.



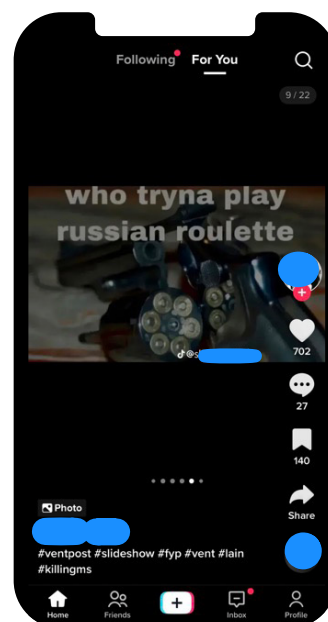
▲ This video has text that reads, "How to die peacefully without any physical pain :)". The video has suggestions on at-home suicide in the comments.



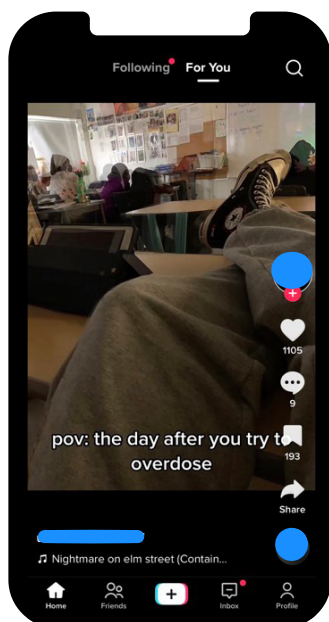
▲ This video has text that reads, "pov: you just wanna die but don't know how to.", with comments giving tips to at-home suicide.



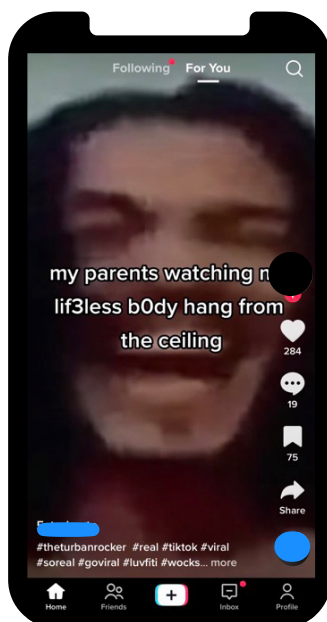
▲ This video has text that reads, "Me on Tuesday, February 14", alongside video of a gun being loaded, hinting at a suggested suicide on Valentine's Day. Comments also have users listing specific dates and times for their own suggested suicide.



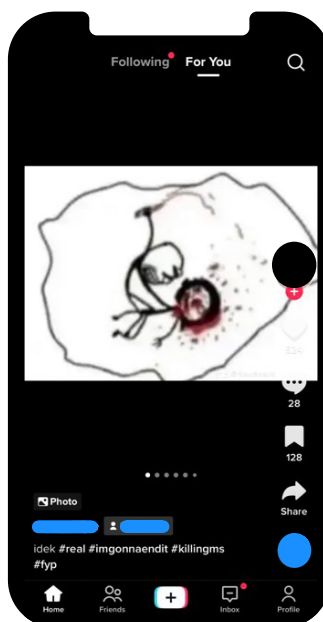
▲ This video is a slideshow of multiple horrifying suggesting suicide, including an image of a pistol with text that reads, "who tryna play russian roulette".



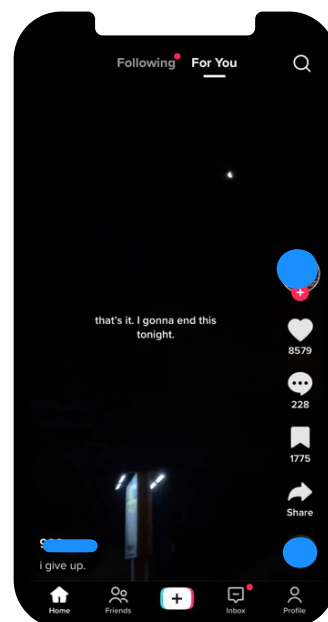
▲ This video shows blurry footage of a classroom and text that reads, "pov: the day after you try to overdose".



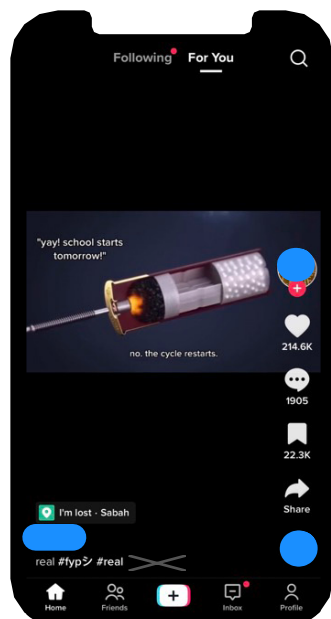
▲ This video has text that reads, "my parents watching my lif3less b0dy hang from the ceiling".



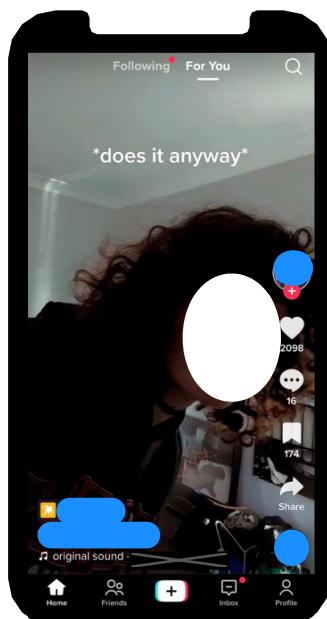
▲ This video has multiple images suggesting suicide.



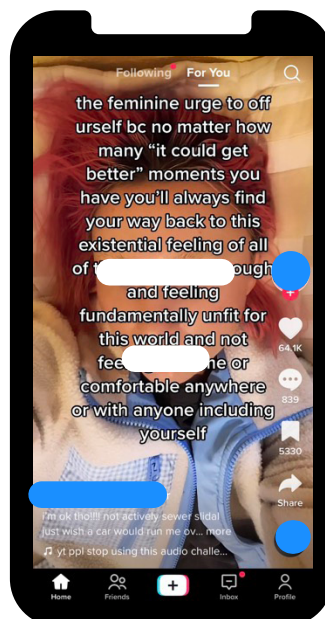
▲ This video has text that reads, "that's it I'm gonna end this tonight" alongside specific suicide dates in the comments.



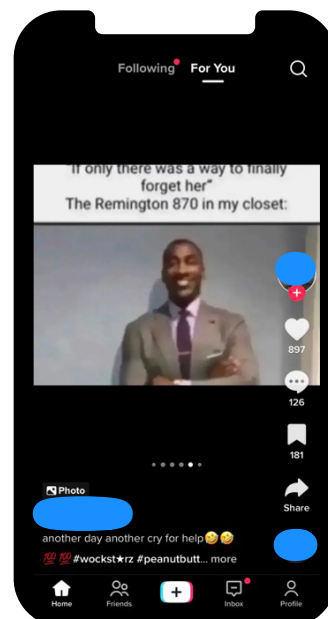
▲ This video has an animation of a shotgun being loaded alongside text that reads, "yay! School starts tomorrow!...no, the cycle restarts.", suggesting suicide as well as comments that mention explicit dates and times for suicide attempts.



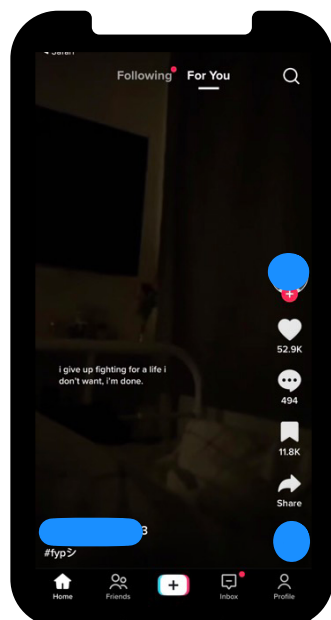
▲ This video has text that reads, "takes antidepressant so I don't off myself...does it anyway."



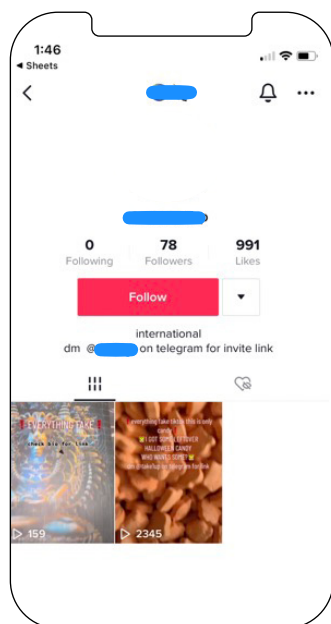
▲ This video has text that reads, "the feminine urge to off urself bc no matter how many "it could get better" moments you have you'll always find your way back to this existential feeling of all of this not being enough and feeling fundamentally unfit for this world and not feeling at home or comfortable anywhere or with anyone including yourself".



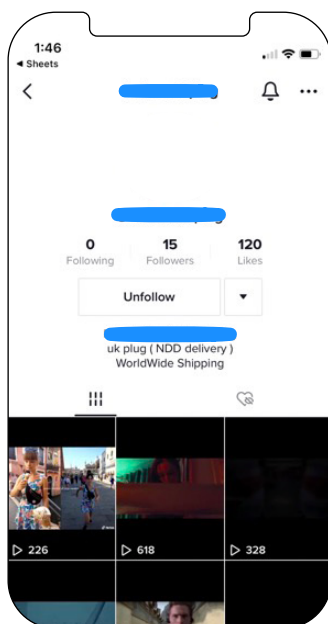
▲ This video is another slideshow or horrifying images including one that reads, "If only there was a way to finally forget her... The Remington 870 in my closet"



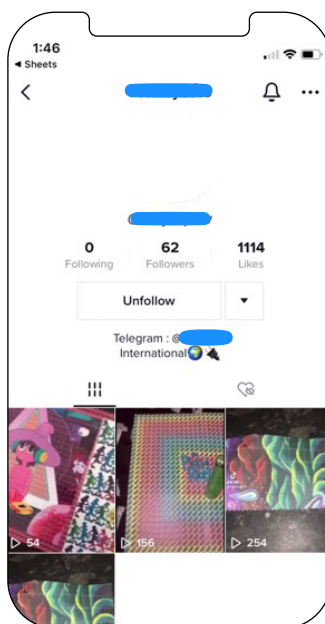
▲ This video has text that reads, "i give up fighting for a life i don't want, i'm done" alongside comments including specific dates for suggested suicide.



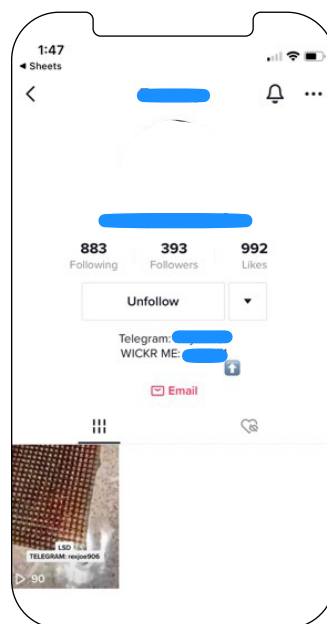
▲ An account named [redacted] which sells MDMA and LSD and offers international shipping.



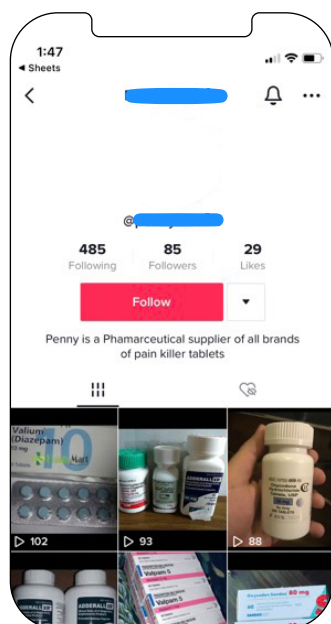
▲ Another account named [redacted] which ships marijuana and MDMA internationally."



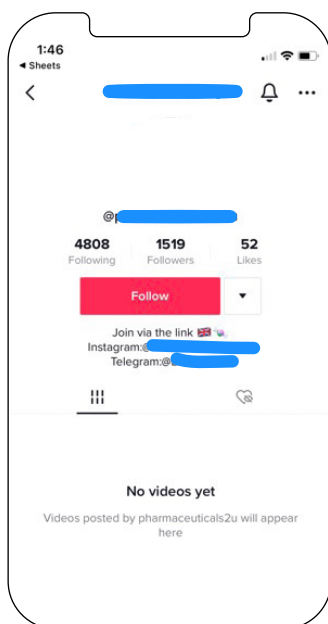
▲ An account named [redacted] which sells LSD and ships internationally.



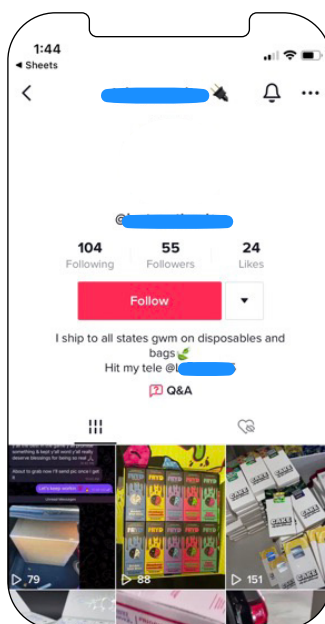
▲ An account named [redacted] which sells LSD.



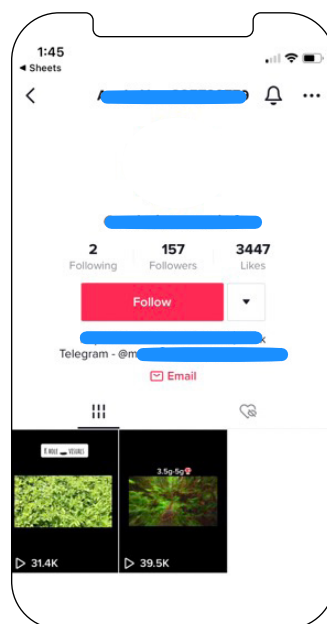
▲ An account named [redacted] which offers to sell all brands of pain killer tablets.



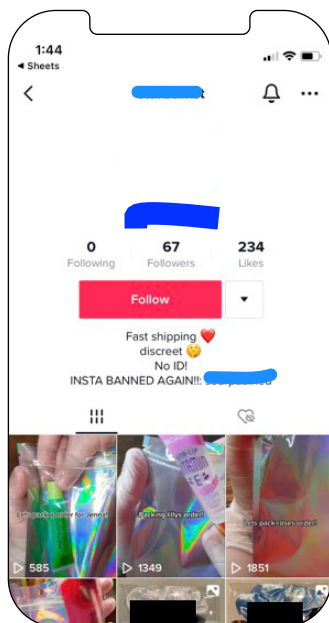
▲ An account named [redacted] which offers a Telegram channel to purchase marijuana and MDMA.



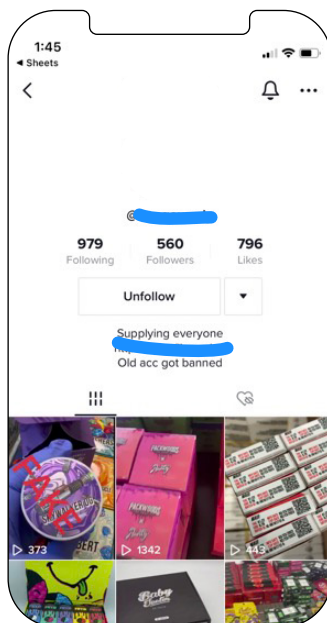
▲ An account with the name [redacted] found selling marijuana and which ships across the U.S.



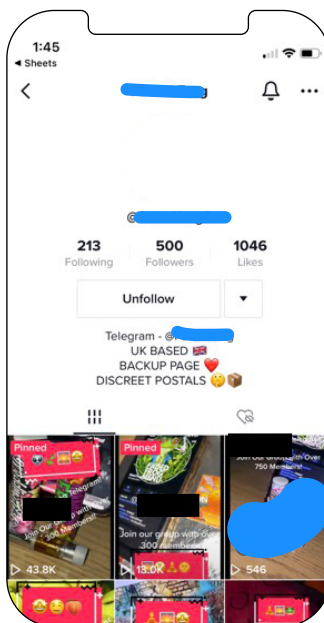
▲ An account with the name [redacted] which sells marijuana as well as Psilocybin mushrooms.



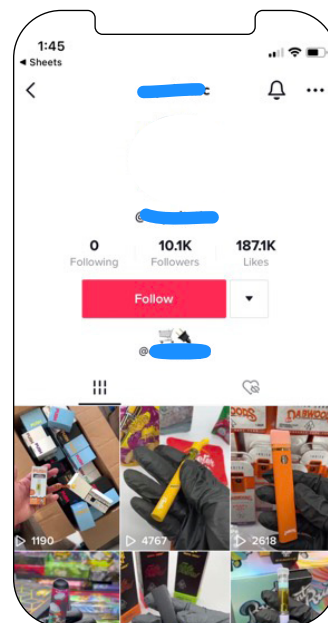
▲ An account with the name @ [redacted] which sells marijuana. The bio of the account mentions they don't require any ID and can do shipping.



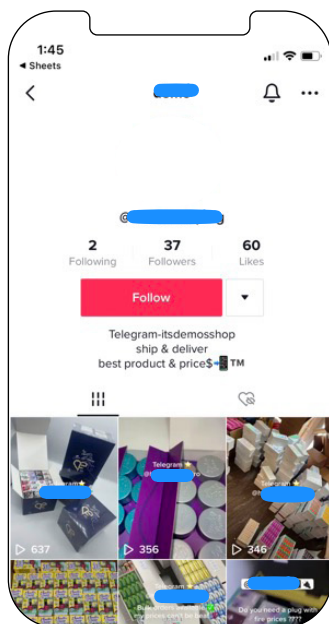
▲ An account with the name @ [redacted] which sells marijuana. The account ships to everyone according to the bio.



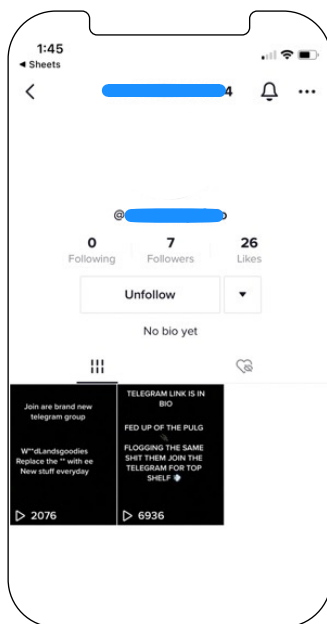
▲ An account with the name @ [redacted] which sells marijuana which offers shipping.



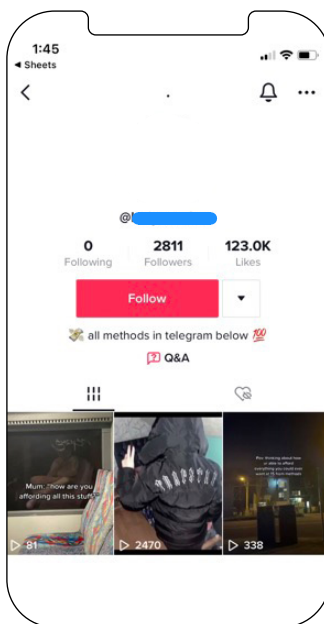
▲ An account with the name @ [redacted] which sells marijuana cartridges for vape pens.



▲ An account with the name @ [redacted] which sells marijuana.



▲ Another account offering a Telegram channel where the user is selling marijuana.



▲ An account with the name @ [redacted] which offers a Telegram channel to buy marijuana.

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Endnotes

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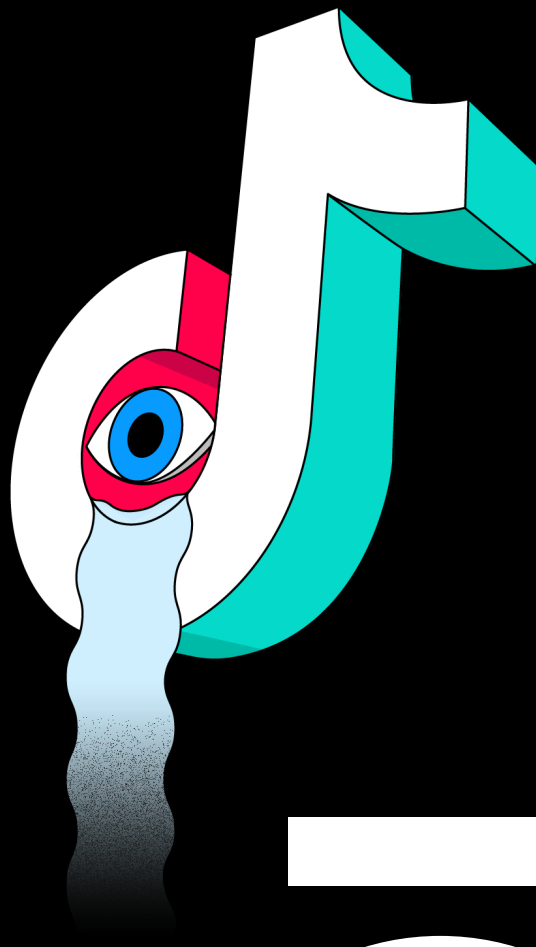
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Suicide, Incels, and Drugs: How TikTok's deadly algorithm harms kids

A report
by Ekō



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