

# United States Senate

COMMITTEES:  
ARMED SERVICES  
COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND  
TRANSPORTATION  
JUDICIARY  
VETERANS' AFFAIRS

November 5, 2019

Alex Zhu  
TikTok Inc, ByteDance Ltd  
10100 Venice Blvd, Suite 301  
Culver City, CA 90232

Dear Mr. Zhu:

I write to express great concern that TikTok, a social media video platform owned by Beijing-based ByteDance, is paving the way for the Chinese government to gain unfettered and unsupervised access to our children's lives.

TikTok is China's best detective—surreptitiously collecting and sharing user data, tracking American tweens and teenagers, and manipulating children's online purchases. TikTok stars can earn considerable amounts of money through the platform when their followers purchase virtual gift emojis priced upwards of \$50 to send to their favorite streamers, who can then turn those emojis back into cash.<sup>1</sup> Children are vulnerable to being solicited to buy and send emojis in exchange for favors, such as live video chats and giving out personal phone numbers, without parental permission.<sup>2</sup> This has become a disturbingly popular trend.

TikTok's policies allow for the sharing of data with any of ByteDance's business partners. This includes advertising networks, outside service providers, and any subsequent sharing that these third parties choose to engage in, regardless of whether it corresponds with TikTok's policies. Although TikTok has created a version of the app geared for children under 13, it still fails to protect them or older teenagers from data surveillance and predatory behavior.

American parents are woefully unaware of the extent to which their children are being exposed to invasive data collection practices while using TikTok. Despite widespread calls for greater transparency, TikTok does not disclose the age demographics of its user base. According to an October 2019 Forbes report, 41 percent of active users in the U.S. are between the ages of 16 and 24, making TikTok one of the most dominant ways to target young users.<sup>3</sup> TikTok masterfully deploys advanced technological tools such as artificial intelligence, machine

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<sup>1</sup> Cook, David. "A Parent's Guide to TikTok (formerly Musical.ly)." Axis. March 1, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Tidy, Joe. "TikTok's young fans 'exploited' for digital gifts." BBC News. July 3, 2019.  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-48725515>.

<sup>3</sup> Bentahar, Amine. "What Brands Should Know About Advertising On TikTok In 2019." Forbes. October 30, 2019.  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2019/10/30/what-brands-should-know-about-advertising-on-tiktok-in-2019/#27cd1e722d01>.

learning, and facial recognition in order to increase time spent on its platform and capture the attention of American youth.<sup>4</sup>

TikTok's age ratings, data collection policies, and safety practices fail to adequately warn parents and vulnerable young people of the material they will encounter. Earlier this year, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) reached a \$5.7 million settlement with TikTok's predecessor Musical.ly over claims that it illegally gathered personal information from children, the largest civil penalty ever obtained by the FTC in a children's privacy case. TikTok's record of violating the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act and refusal to delete videos and other data even after requested by parents reveals that TikTok does not properly protect children in the social media age.

It is crucial that Chinese-linked efforts to collect data from American children ends. Because TikTok is owned by ByteDance, the app is subject to foreign laws that allow China's government to seize its information and technology. In light of these concerns, I would like to know what TikTok is doing to protect children's privacy on its platform and the steps it has taken to safeguard minors from unauthorized data collection and deceptive marketing schemes. Please provide a written response to the following questions by November 26, 2019.

1. How many American children under the age of 18 are using TikTok, broken down by each age group?
2. How much revenue has TikTok generated from American customers over the past 5 years for in app emoji purchases, and what percentage of that revenue was from children under the age of 18?
3. What efforts has TikTok taken to require parental consent for minors to use its app, and what safeguards does TikTok have in place to ensure that parents of minors are aware of and consenting to each emoji purchase on TikTok?
4. How is the version of TikTok for children ages 12 and under different from the version for users ages 13 and up?
5. To which third party providers does TikTok share information that is collected from child users under age of 13 and teenage users ages 13 to 17?

Thank you for your attention to these important issues. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Marsha Blackburn  
United States Senator

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<sup>4</sup> "Take China's TikTok App Security Threat Seriously." Bloomberg. October 29, 2019. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2019-10-29/worries-that-tiktok-is-a-threat-to-national-security-have-merit?srd=new-economy-forum>.