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Ethics Memo #1

       With over one billion users worldwide, TikTok has an immense influence on people everywhere. What makes TikTok unique is its "For You" page. The "For You" page is a limitless feed of videos recommended by an algorithm based on the user's past interactions. Unlike Instagram or Facebook, where the home page is comprised of posts by people users follow, TikTok's homepage features posts from anyone, not just people you follow. TikTok is also unique for its Infinite Scroll. TikTok's feed is endless both horizontally and vertically: Horizontally because videos loop an infinite amount of times with no pause or break, and vertically because there are an infinite amount of videos to scroll through. There is no exit from TikTok's feed. There are two ethical concerns that arise with TikTok's technology: its sporadic nature, and its addictiveness.

       Because you cannot control what is featured on your "For You Page", TikTok users are completely surprised by the videos that pop up. Thus, users are often surprised by videos displaying disordered eating behavior, violence, sexual abuse, etc. Former TikTok employee Ashley Velez stated in an interview with LAList that, "[She] would see death and graphic, graphic pornography. [She] would see nude underage children…people get shot in the face, and another video of a kid getting beaten…" The sporadic nature of the app is what makes it more dangerous than its other social media counterparts. Users have no say in which posts are presented on their feed; they also have no warning of posts that may appear triggering to them.

       TikTok Is engineered to be addictive. Tristan Harris, the former design ethicist at Google and co-founder of the Center for Humane Technology, explained that TikTok's feed is engineered to simulate a slot machine. "Operant Conditioning" is what makes TikTok and Slot machines so addictive. In operant conditioning, "behavior is either strengthened by reinforcement or weakened by punishment" (UX collective). Scrolling through TikTok is like pulling a slot machine. You never know when you'll receive a "reward" and there is nothing stopping you from trying again, and again, and again…. The reward being dispersed intermittently is another component of the app's addictiveness. You keep scrolling through your feed because of that possibility of reinforcement. The ease of scrolling combined with Operant Conditioning heeds addiction.

       Right now, TikTok offers a feature that allows users to ban certain hashtags that are triggering to them. Unfortunately, this is simply not enough. Users could ban the #anorexia, but that doesn't mean videos of extremely thin women won't appear on their feed under the clever hashtag "#An0r3xia" or better, no hashtag at all. If TikTok engineers want to invoke change, I suggest they allow users to ban certain categories of videos from their "For You" page. If the algorithm is smart enough to track my interests, it should be smart enough to ban my disinterests. This way, users could ban any and all videos that appear triggering to them, not just hashtags.

To break the endless scroll, TikTok currently features "time management videos" to appear on a feed when someone has been using the app for too long. Again, this is simply not enough. These time management videos offer no break in the horizontal or vertical scroll. In addition, Users have no say in how long is too long… I suggest that TikTok engineers allow users to create their own time limits. I also suggest that engineers offer breaks in TikTok's feed. This could look like: not looping videos, or creating white space in between videos.

I predict that people would counter my argument by suggesting that, "It is the responsibility of the users to protect themselves, not the app." I agree that people should not download TikTok if they are prone to addiction, or have certain triggers; however, I also agree that TikTok engineers should be held accountable for the unhealthy UX/UI they promote. According to researcher Ysabel Gerrard, "...there are some more things that TikTok urgently needs to do to make the platform even safer" (Guardian). The majority of TikTok users are young. According to Statista, "as of June 2020, users in their teens accounted for 32.5 percent of TikTok's active user accounts in the United States." Young people are at the highest risk for developing addictive habits. Although there is no legal obligation for TikTok to protect its users, there is a moral obligation. TikTok is at the forefront of social media platforms. The impact this app has is immense. TikTok needs to protect its users by giving them control over their "For You" page. This simple act could save millions of lives and reduce the risk of young people being exposed to disturbing videos, and or developing an addiction to TikTok.

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