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Islamic State Turns to Teen-Friendly TikTok, Adorning Posts With Pink Hearts

Videos, since removed, represent challenge for app's Beijing owner, Bytedance, which has hired thousands of moderators to curate content



An image from a video of a purported Islamic State supporter posted on TikTok reads 'Come back soon, God willing.' TikTok has banned this anonymous account and deleted the video. PHOTO: STORYFUL

By Georgia Wells

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Islamic State militants have been posting short propaganda videos to TikTok, the social network known for lighthearted content popular with teenagers.

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Many were set to Islamic State songs. Some included TikTok filters, or images, of stars and hearts that stream across the screen in an apparent attempt to resonate with young people.

“We pledge allegiance ’til death,” voices sang in Arabic in one of the videos, which appear to have been posted in recent weeks.

The posts from approximately two dozen accounts, identified by social-media intelligence company Storyful, appeared to target TikTok’s users as part of a new show of strength—and possible enlistment tool—as U.S. troops withdraw from Syria. Islamic State has focused on online propaganda since its inception, including using social media to spread its message, setting it apart from other jihadist groups.

The postings followed the release last month by the extremist group of a purported message from leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in which he called on his followers to redouble their efforts to further the cause after losing control over the last of its self-proclaimed caliphate in parts of Syria and Iraq earlier this year.

The videos that were posted on TikTok aren’t always about direct calls to recruitment, according to Elisabeth Kendall, an Oxford University expert on extremism. Sometimes they are intended to rouse enthusiasm and support for Islamic State, particularly ones featuring Islamic State anthems.

“The rhyme, beat, evocative lyrics and punchy delivery are especially appealing to youth,” she said. “This catchy sing-along method for propagating ISIS ideology means it spreads quickly and sticks in the collective memory. It tends to be far more effective than sermons or theological debate and treatises.”

The extremist content marks a new challenge for TikTok. The app, owned by Beijing-based Bytedance Ltd., features short videos that started becoming popular in the U.S. in 2018 and has been embraced by teens. It was the third-most installed app world-wide in the first quarter, behind Facebook Inc.’s WhatsApp and Messenger, and about 30% of users are under the age of 18, according to internal TikTok documents viewed by the Journal.

Part of what has endeared TikTok to users has been the nature of its content, which includes dancing high-school students, harmless pranks, lip synching and funny security guards. To maintain its culture of light-hearted fun, TikTok has invested in advanced algorithms that people familiar with the matter say can detect many types of harmful content. TikTok has also hired thousands of content moderators in China, the U.S. and elsewhere to curate what ends up on the

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'We will send a message to the whole world,' says the purported Islamic State supporter in a screen shot of this video posted to TikTok and identified by Storyful. TikTok has banned this anonymous account and deleted the video. PHOTO: STORYFUL

use TikTok to promote and support these organizations," the company says in its guidelines. The videos promoting Islamic State show that enforcing the guidelines proves difficult.

"This is an industry-wide challenge complicated by bad actors who actively seek to circumvent

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An image purported to be of Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, posted on a militant website in April. He urged followers to redouble their efforts, according to a message from the group last month. PHOTO: AL-FURQAN MEDIA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

continuously develop ever-stronger controls to proactively detect suspicious activity,” she said.

TikTok removed from its site the videos flagged to it by the Journal and canceled the accounts responsible. TikTok appeared to have already removed other terror-propagandizing videos.

TikTok isn’t the only social network that extremist groups have used to spread their messages and recruit new members. In 2017, Facebook, Twitter Inc. and Alphabet Inc.’s YouTube faced criticism from governments around the world alleging that their platforms had become havens for Islamic State militants seeking to spread propaganda.

In response, the tech companies hired thousands of content moderators and implemented automated technologies to quickly scrub objectionable content, including creating a shared database of identifiers of online terror images and videos. Because of the measures, the companies have been able to remove extremist content more quickly. Facebook has said it removed more than 26 million posts and videos related to global terrorist groups in the past two years.

The videos fit with a pattern of Islamic State trying to demonstrate its relevance, even as the overall amount of propaganda coming out of the group declines, said Mia Bloom, a professor at Georgia State University who studies how extremist groups use online platforms.

“Some of their intention is to say ‘I’m still here,’ ” Ms. Bloom said.

Less extreme content now poses a bigger challenge for Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Those companies are struggling at times with how to decide when to remove messages that promote

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The woman in this screen shot is labeled 'jihad lover' and carrying the Islamic State flag. Videos like the one this screen shot captures are likely designed to target young girls, experts say. This video was identified by Storyful. TikTok has banned this anonymous account and deleted the video.

harassment and abuse; other users charge the companies with censorship when the content is removed.

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The presence of extremist content on TikTok could strain its already-tense relationship with some lawmakers in Washington. U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio (R., Fla.), has called for a national-security review of the 2017 deal that enabled the Chinese owner of TikTok to expand its reach in the U.S.

The approximately two dozen accounts responsible for the extremist posts identified by Storyful weren't quiet about their allegiances.

They used ISIS songs, flags and references to Islamic State's official media arm, Amaq Agency. Some had more than 1,000 followers. Storyful is owned by News Corp, the parent company of The Wall Street Journal.

Accounts broadcast the group's news, including one that posted screenshots of statements from Amaq. A message dated Oct. 11 claimed Islamic State detonated a car bomb in Northeast Syria.

Other videos featured glamorous shots of fighters set to sound tracks of jihadist songs. The gunman in one video—which received 68 likes—said that it is God's order and that they won't give up. That account had a woman's name.

Young girls appeared to be the targeted audience for other videos, which used the phrase “jihad lover” and lots of flower icons. They interspersed video images of running horses and young men wearing Western clothes.

“We will send a message to the whole world,” a man said to the camera in one of the videos. Pink hearts spilled from the video, filling the screen, as the man praised Abu Hamza Al-Muhajer, an alias for a leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq who was killed in 2010. “If our first fighter is killed, the last fighter will handle it. You will see.”

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