

TikTok users including Russell Brand given special status, messages show

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Author: Hibaq Farah

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TikTok has given special status to certain high-profile accounts, with moderators in Europe encouraged to be more lenient with content posted by people including Russell Brand, according to internal messages seen by the Guardian. The demand to be less stringent has also been underlined in meetings with moderators, the Guardian has been told. Documents suggest that staff at the viral video app have created a hierarchy of users, with certain individuals or groups assigned internal tags that allow them more leeway. Certain seemingly important accounts have been given internal tags, which don't seem to appear on other accounts. Tags that point to an elevated status include "super account", "super account super account", "Top PGC" and "top creator". It is understood that "top creator" is used as an umbrella term for these designations, although in some instances it is also employed as a user-level tag for an individual account. One TikTok staff member told the Guardian: "No one understands what a super account is, but we are told to be extra cautious." TikTok insists this is not company policy. It said it was inaccurate to say that staff had been asked to be less stringent with certain accounts. It says its guidelines are applied to everyone who uses the app. The Guardian has been investigating TikTok amid ongoing concern about how it moderates its more than 1 billion users worldwide and has seen internal communications that are likely to raise fresh questions about how the app is policed. According to the messages, moderators responsible for policing thousands of posts a day across Europe, the Middle East and Africa have been asked to follow what appears to be informal advice when it comes to top creators, seemingly setting aside TikTok's official guidelines. The Guardian has been told the top creator tag does not appear in Opus, a massive portal comprising an official set of guidelines that are supposed to be followed by TikTok moderators. Instead, the tag appears to be used by advisers, who use the umbrella term top creator in internal chats to describe certain users. According to the internal communications seen by the Guardian, moderators have been told to treat accounts that carry those tags more leniently than those of other users. In one message sent by an adviser to a group of more than 70 moderators under the heading that included the words "top creators", the advice was to be "more lenient" in what was described as "edge cases". A TikTok staff member said: "I understand it to mean that if you consider a video to be an edge case then you are urged to not apply policies if it's a top creator." TikTok said it did not recognise the term "edge case". But the Guardian understands the term "edge cases" refers to videos that are considered on the borderline of flouting TikTok's guidelines. It also appears in the software that runs the official content appeals system, which is called Rock. Accounts with special designations include one created by Brand, the actor and comedian who is facing multiple claims of sexual misconduct. Others include those of Manchester United, the pop star Sam Smith and the YouTuber Ethan Payne. There

is no suggestion that the individuals are aware of the tags applied to them. The request to moderators appears to challenge TikTok's own guidelines, which say its rules should apply to "everyone and everything" on their platform. Some of the designations, and requests to be more lenient, have left one staff member confused. The employee told the Guardian: "How can you do that about something you haven't properly defined?" In one case seen by the Guardian, the super account designation is defined as a label for popular celebrities. In another, a super account is listed among a subheading of "special labels"; another label is "institutional account". It is understood that TikTok insists such terms are not used by the trust and safety teams and it is inaccurate to report otherwise. From the examples seen by the Guardian, not all public figure accounts were given super account status. Brand's account carries the title "super account super account", an apparently rarely used designation, the Guardian understands. Smith also has this user level, while Payne, a member of the Sidemen YouTube group who is better known as Behzinga, has the super account designation, as does the TV presenter Michael Barrymore. Another tag that appears in accounts is "high influence creator" with a warning that reads "moderate carefully to avoid inaccuracies". Another member of the Sidemen, KSI, has a high influence creator tag on his account, as does the TikTok Jesus account, which has 8 million followers. The BBC TikTok account does not have any similar tags, nor does the England football team's TikTok account. In one instance seen by the Guardian, moderators are praised for not over-moderating top creator cases. In another example, an adviser on the platform has told moderators to spend more time moderating videos for top accounts in order to avoid errors. The advice given in relation to top creators appears to contradict wider internal guidance on moderating, which places an emphasis on speedy decision-making. A TikTok staff member said of the internal labels: "It is like an extra level of protection." A TikTok spokesperson said: "These allegations about TikTok's policies are wrong or based on misunderstandings, while the Guardian has not given us enough information about their other claims to investigate. Our community guidelines apply equally to all content on TikTok." Recently TikTok moderators also referred to an internal tool called Lighthouse, which stores information about users. The tool is accessible on an internal website hosted by ByteDance, TikTok's owner. The user information that was accessible to moderators included device type, for example whether a user had an iPhone, and what model, and information on the video. Moderators needed extra permissions to go beyond this. The Guardian was told that moderators were told in a training session that Lighthouse had access to the device ID and that was how the platform could ban a device to prevent users making a new account. TikTok also allows the promotion of a portal operated by the misogynist influencer Andrew Tate, whose presence or promotion is banned on the platform under an internal list marked "promotion of hateful ideology". Tate's Hustler's University is noted as an associated organisation on this list, but the Real World Portal, which offers people lessons and mentoring in "how to make money online" and is being advertised on the platform, is permitted a presence despite the controversy around its owner, according to internal communications seen by the Guardian. The internal communication advises moderators not to tag the portal with "promotion of hateful ideology" for people advertising it unless there is a presence of Andrew Tate. The British far-right figure Tommy Robinson is also banned from the platform under the "hateful ideology" list and should not be appearing on the platform at all; despite this, there appear to be several videos featuring Robinson on TikTok. Last year, a Forbes investigation found that TikTok employed a two-tiered moderation system that gave preferential treatment to influencers, celebrities and other VIPs, according to leaked audio recordings of internal TikTok meetings from 2021. It found that one employee on the trust and safety team told moderators: "We don't want to treat these users as, um, like any other accounts. There's a bit more leniency, I'd say." TikTok community guidelines are clear, however, that content moderation rules should be applied consistently. This year, the global head of product policy at TikTok said: "the guidelines apply to everyone and everything on our platform."