

TikTok staff told to avoid flagging problems with Amazon accounts

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Author: Hibaq Farah

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TikTok staff were told they should avoid flagging potential problems on Amazon accounts to protect the video platform's lucrative commercial relationship with the e-commerce multinational, according to internal communications seen by the Guardian. Some moderators were told in the autumn not to take negative action against a list of more than 60 Amazon-related accounts on TikTok because the US company is a heavy advertiser on the platform. According to exchanges seen by the Guardian, staff who vet TikTok videos and ensure they adhere to content guidelines were advised not to take down the accounts or apply any "tags". Tagging a video or account could ultimately lead to an account being taken down or not being shown on the For You Page. TikTok insisted this was not official company policy. A spokesperson said: "These allegations about TikTok's policies are wrong or based on misunderstandings." TikTok's community guidelines state that "our approach to content moderation uses the same criteria, no matter who creates it". The Guardian has been investigating for months how TikTok moderates its app. The Chinese-owned app has more than a billion users worldwide and has become an influential platform across multiple fields from politics to gen Z news consumption and culture. It is the fastest growing source of news in the UK and in the US about a third of adults aged 18 to 29 say they regularly get news on TikTok. The Guardian discovered that teams of moderators responsible for policing thousands of posts a day mostly from Europe, the Middle East and Africa were being advised to give preferential treatment to some creators and accounts, seemingly departing from TikTok's official guidelines. The reason cited for exempting Amazon was set out in exchanges sent on Lark, TikTok's internal messaging system. They appear to have made clear the importance of Amazon as the platform's highest-paying advertising spender, and a desire for the platform to protect that relationship. The message about Amazon was sent by a team lead, who is a point of contact for moderators and responsible for managing a team of them. The message was sent in a chat that also had a site lead present, a senior staff member who is responsible for overseeing the entire site. The Guardian has seen no evidence to suggest these messages were later retracted by senior members of staff. Further internal communications seen by the Guardian indicated there are several other unnamed companies on a protected list. It has been alleged that the presence of these companies on the list has led to some moderators being generally wary of tagging other major corporate accounts, or companies of a similar size, for fear of not following unofficial internal guidance. This message was flagged to a group of dozens of moderators, team leaders and site managers. The purpose of the group is to disseminate policy updates and spread information on moderating to moderators, who are responsible for "policing" TikTok across Europe. A TikTok staff member said: "The message is saying do not moderate Amazon accounts, and

then there is a list of Amazon accounts.” Internal messages seen by the Guardian suggest the instruction was sent following instances in which a “wrong decision” was taken on videos from these Amazon accounts. The Amazon accounts moderators were told not to ban or tag include the official accounts for Amazon’s Prime Video service, which has 418.2m likes and regularly posts clips from films, interviews with celebrities and trailers. Other accounts include those for Amazon Music, its Twitch video game streaming service and the Audible audiobook service. The Amazon-controlled accounts also include the official TikTok account for the film database IMDb, which has more than 45m likes. There are about 60 accounts in total. 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.” TikTok says it employs 6,000 moderators in Europe and has 40,000 people working on safety around the world. The policies that moderators look at to understand what videos are in violation of TikTok policies are set out in a massive portal called Opus – a comprehensive set of guidelines that holds the platform’s policy frameworks and operational guidelines and is used internally by moderators to understand what videos to “tag” policies on to that they suspect are in breach of these rules. The policy catalogue, only viewable internally, has guidelines for short videos on topics such as “promotion of tobacco”, “high risk dangerous driving”, “suspected underaged user”, “negative stereotype of a protected group”, “violent fighting in a news or fictional setting/violent fighting in a professional setting”, and “dangerous misinformation”. An advertising industry source said: “Giving preferential treatment to large spending clients in social media is often discussed between platforms and the ad industry. And it is pretty much expected.” The source added: “Big spending advertisers will want any concern with their content expedited to human moderators quickly.” Imran Ahmed, the chief executive of the Center for Countering Digital Hate campaign group, said privileging the speech of certain users over others was “fundamentally unfair”. He said he believed that “the way these platforms selectively enforce their rules undermines public discourse by giving an unfair advantage to some over others”. “It seems these decisions have been taken behind closed doors with no oversight or transparency – which allows abuses of power and can lead to decisions taken against the public interest,” he added. Amazon is consistently the biggest spender on digital advertising in the US, with an outlay of \$1.4bn (£1.1bn) in 2022, according to the market intelligence firm Sensor Tower. TikTok community guidelines say that governments, politicians and news accounts are subject to different enforcement to align with a commitment to human rights and freedom of expression, though they say “we treat their content just like any other account and remove any violations”. It is not noted in TikTok’s community guidelines whether companies and those in financial partnerships with the platform are to be exempted from them. However, all advertisers on TikTok are required to comply with its terms of service, community guidelines and all of its policies.