

TikTok Social Network - A Communication Channel for Protecting Children from Abuse and Exploitation

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Abstract: *This study examines the effectiveness of TikTok as a communication channel for promoting child protection against abuse and exploitation, in the context of the platform surpassing one billion monthly active users and joining the Technology Coalition in 2021. Employing document analysis and case study methods of communication campaigns produced by governmental bodies, NGOs, and influential content creators from 2020 to 2023, the study applies Social Media Theory, Reception Theory, and Interactive Communication Theory to analyze mechanisms of message dissemination, user reception, and community engagement on TikTok. Findings indicate that short-form videos, algorithmic personalization, and high viral potential make TikTok a conducive environment for raising awareness, supporting digital education, and fostering collective action on issues related to child protection. The study also proposes strategic directions for optimizing TikTok's educational and communicative functions amid an increasingly complex digital ecosystem.*

Keywords: *child protection, social media, communication, child abuse, TikTok.*

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1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of social media has reshaped contemporary communication environments by creating a globally connected network in which individuals increasingly participate in producing, sharing and circulating information. Users now operate as independent communicators within a multidimensional and highly interactive information ecology. This environment is particularly influential for children and adolescents, who constitute one of the most active yet vulnerable user groups. As a result, the dissemination of knowledge and preventive communication related to child protection on digital platforms has become an urgent and unavoidable societal need.

According to Article 4, Clause 5 of the 2016 Children Law, child abuse refers to acts that cause physical, emotional or psychological harm and includes violence, exploitation, sexual abuse, trafficking, abandonment and other detrimental behaviors (Vietnam National

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Assembly, 2016). In recent years, incidents of child abuse and exploitation have increased in both frequency and severity. Cases involving sexual assault, domestic violence, school bullying and labor exploitation have drawn widespread public concern and have raised critical alarms about the safety and well-being of children. Global data underscore the gravity of the issue. The World Health Organization's World Report on Violence and Health (2021) estimates that around one billion children experience violence each year in homes, schools or communities, and more than 200 million children are affected by sexual violence. These statistics highlight the pressing need for effective communication frameworks aimed at prevention and protection. (WHO 2021).

Before the advancement of digital technologies, awareness and education regarding child abuse were primarily delivered through conferences, workshops, traditional media outlets and opinion surveys. These approaches, although valuable, offered limited reach and interaction. The emergence of social media has eliminated spatial and temporal barriers, enabling protective messages to spread rapidly and directly to target audiences. Evidence from the World Health Organization and recent scholarship demonstrates that social media can effectively increase awareness and equip young users with essential skills to respond to online risks. At the same time, the high velocity and participatory nature of social media introduce new challenges concerning harmful content, exposure risks and inconsistent regulatory mechanisms. These conditions require governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations to develop an informed understanding of platform dynamics and incorporate appropriate strategies for safe and effective communication. (Sameer Hinduja, 2020).

Among contemporary platforms, TikTok has gained exceptional prominence due to its short-form video format, algorithmic personalization and strong appeal among young users. Although TikTok is increasingly adopted by governmental, educational and civil society organizations for child-protection communication, systematic academic research examining its communicative mechanisms, message reception and preventive effectiveness remains limited. This gap underscores the importance of scholarly inquiry into the platform's role in shaping protective communication.

The present study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how TikTok functions as a communication channel for child protection and how messages concerning abuse prevention are disseminated and received within its digital ecosystem. To guide this investigation, the study addresses the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How does TikTok's large-scale platform architecture and algorithmic content distribution shape the accessibility of child-protection messages?

Research Question 2: In what ways do young users interpret and internalize child-protection messages within an environment structured by TikTok's safety policies and educational resources?

Research Question 3: How do TikTok's interaction mechanisms influence the diffusion and communicative effectiveness of child-protection messages, and how do these dynamics intersect with processes of access and reception?

2. Research Methods and Theoretical Framework

This study employs a multi-method design that integrates document analysis with case study research in order to ensure both analytical depth and breadth in examining the role

of TikTok as a communication tool for child protection. The combination of these methods enables triangulation and strengthens the credibility of the findings:

- Document analysis was conducted to synthesize a wide range of scholarly works, technical reports and communication practices related to the use of TikTok in education, child protection and digital awareness. The corpus includes peer-reviewed articles, international organizational reports from bodies such as UNICEF, UN Women and Save the Children, as well as studies on children's behavioural patterns on TikTok and the official TikTok channels of institutions, media organizations and social initiatives between 2020 and 2023. This analytical process establishes the conceptual foundation, identifies research gaps and informs the criteria for assessing communication effectiveness on TikTok.

- Case study research was employed to examine specific communication products on TikTok that focus on protecting children from abuse and exploitation. The selected cases met criteria related to source credibility and thematic relevance, including channels operated by influential individuals, governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations working in the fields of family welfare, child protection and social security. The analysed videos consisted of content addressing child abuse prevention that demonstrated notable audience engagement, as reflected in views, comments, shares or broader community resonance. This method provides an in-depth understanding of how messages are produced, disseminated and interpreted within real communication contexts, while also offering empirical grounding for the arguments derived from document analysis..

To construct a comprehensive analytical framework, the study incorporates three theoretical perspectives that elucidate the communicative dynamics of TikTok in the context of child protection:

The first is Social Media Theory, which offers a foundation for analysing the structural characteristics and operational dynamics of social platforms. It emphasizes the influence of algorithms, content formats and interaction mechanisms in shaping user attention and behaviour (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In the case of TikTok, whose recommendation system and short-form video design facilitate rapid and wide dissemination, this theory helps explain how safety-related messages are encountered by children and adolescents, and why the platform holds significant potential for influencing vulnerable audiences.

The second theoretical lens is Reception Theory, drawing on Hall's encoding/decoding model. This perspective posits that meaning is not inherent in the message but is actively constructed by viewers through processes of interpretation and negotiation. Its relevance to TikTok is evident in the platform's multimodal nature, where messages are conveyed through audiovisual cues, rhythmic patterns, visual effects and emotive symbols. Reception Theory enables an examination of how young audiences internalize, negotiate and potentially transform safety messages, thereby offering insights into the likelihood of converting awareness into preventive behaviour in digital environments.

The third theoretical component is Interactive Communication Theory, which highlights the centrality of reciprocal feedback in achieving communication effectiveness. Building on Rafaeli's conceptualization of interactivity as linked and contingent exchanges, this theory underscores that the impact of a message increases when communicators and audiences engage in continuous feedback loops (Rafaeli, 1988). TikTok's features, including comments,

shares, duets, stitches and reactive videos, create extended cycles of interaction that encourage users not only to receive but also to reinterpret and re-circulate content. This theoretical lens clarifies how the platform fosters public discourse and generates collective motivation to protect children from abuse.

The integration of these three theoretical frameworks aligns closely with the objectives of the study and captures the essential dimensions of TikTok-based communication. Social Media Theory elucidates platform structure and content distribution, Reception Theory explains audience meaning-making processes and Interactive Communication Theory accounts for the mechanisms of feedback, engagement and diffusion. Taken together, these perspectives enable an interdisciplinary and holistic analysis of technological affordances, user behaviour and social impact in the domain of child protection within the digital environment.

3. Results

3.1. Scale and communicative characteristics of TikTok

Since its launch in 2016, TikTok has rapidly consolidated its position as a dominant global social media platform. Its success is attributed to features that simplify video creation and editing, an extensive library of visual and sound effects, and a highly personalized recommendation system. Together, these affordances have shaped a dynamic short-video ecosystem encompassing diverse genres such as music, comedy, sports, lifestyle, and education. From its inception, the platform's developers intentionally targeted adolescents as a core user segment, which partly explains its strong resonance among younger generations (Weimann & Masri, 2020).

By 2023, TikTok reported more than one billion monthly active users, ranking sixth among the world's most widely used social networking platforms according to Datareportal. Kevin Roose observes that TikTok's appeal is particularly pronounced among Millennials and Generation Z, cohorts characterized by their digital nativity and preference for creativity-driven, visually compelling communication experiences (The New York Times, 2022). In this context, employing TikTok for child-protection communication is not merely a matter of capitalizing on a popular platform; rather, it constitutes a direct approach to reaching the demographic groups most central to the issue, including children, adolescents, and parents.

Consequently, communication on child sexual abuse prevention on TikTok should be conceptualized as a systematic educational process. Effective messaging must go beyond information provision to include risk recognition, guidance on coping strategies, and clear pathways for seeking safe and appropriate assistance. This aligns with evidence presented in previous sections indicating that short-form, scenario-based content on TikTok can support children in internalizing protective behaviors and understanding available support mechanisms.

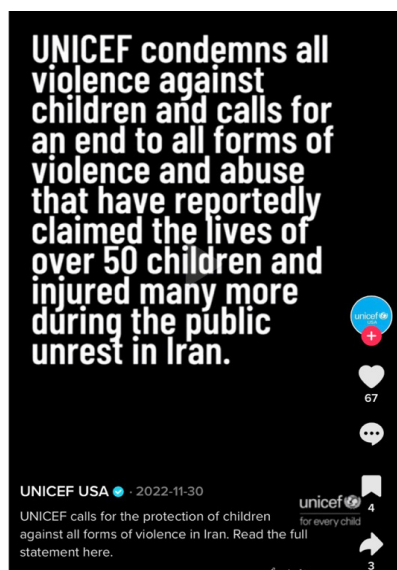
3.2. TikTok's efforts to build a safer environment for protecting children from abuse and exploitation

A growing body of research and professional assessments, including evaluations by the UK Safer Internet Centre, suggests that TikTok is gradually positioning itself as a relatively safe and trustworthy environment for younger users, especially with respect to child-protection and

online-safety standards (House, 2022). Since 2020, TikTok has implemented a series of child-safety policies, including age-based access restrictions, explicit prohibitions against violent and sexual content, and strict rules governing the use of children's images and personal data without parental consent. These measures aim to reduce the likelihood that minors are exposed to, or become victims of, online exploitation or abuse (TikTok, 2023).

To strengthen content-moderation capabilities, TikTok has invested heavily in automated detection technologies capable of identifying harmful visual and audio material. Notably, the removal of more than 89 million videos violating child-protection standards demonstrates the platform's decisive enforcement of safety regulations and highlights the critical role of algorithmic surveillance in safeguarding vulnerable users (TikTok, 2023).

Beyond internal policy reform, TikTok has expanded partnerships with international organizations and global coalitions dedicated to child online safety. In 2021, the platform became a member of the Technology Coalition, a worldwide alliance focused on combating child sexual exploitation and abuse online. This collaboration involves leading institutions such as the Family Online Safety Institute, ConnectSafely, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), the WePROTECT Global Alliance, the DQ Institute, and the Internet Watch Foundation (TikTok, 2021). Through these partnerships, TikTok aims to refine its safety features, align platform governance with global best practices, and contribute to a secure online environment that prioritizes the protection of minors.



(Source: [TikTok](#)).

Collaborative activities include supporting verified accounts for NGOs, co-producing educational video content, sponsoring virtual events, and developing themes centered on digital literacy, emotional wellbeing, and child protection. These initiatives demonstrate that TikTok's ambitions extend beyond entertainment; the platform is actively positioning itself as a socially responsible digital environment that contributes meaningfully to public welfare

An example can be seen in UNICEF's use of TikTok to post content warning about child abuse during protests in Iran. The content, translated into English, reads: *"UNICEF condemns all violence against children and calls for an end to all forms of violence and abuse that have reportedly claimed the lives of over 50 children and injured many more during the public unrest in Iran."*

3.3. TikTok as an educational resource for preventing child abuse and exploitation

The evolution of digital education has enabled TikTok to function not only as an entertainment platform but also as a significant channel for disseminating knowledge related to child protection. With a single smart device, users can access educational content on preventing abuse and exploitation anytime and anywhere. Numerous governmental bodies and non-governmental organizations working in the fields of family welfare, child rights, and

youth development have leveraged TikTok's short-form, visually rich videos to implement educational projects and promote protective behaviors. These contents frequently incorporate personal narratives, practical advice, scenario-based demonstrations, and skill-oriented guidance, supporting both children and parents in recognizing signs of abuse, understanding their rights, and adopting self-protection strategies. TikTok, therefore, increasingly operates as an educational communication institution capable of shaping public awareness and attitudes toward child abuse and violence.

In recent years, TikTok has expanded its partnerships with ministries, governmental agencies, and NGOs to diversify child-protection content and promote socially constructive values. Under the endorsement of Vietnam's Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, the Department of Child Affairs collaborated with TikTok to launch the “#tienhocle” campaign and the official account @ViTreEm. The campaign encouraged users to practice situational exercises presented through short videos, thereby disseminating moral education, life skills, and child-protection knowledge among parents and adolescents. Its purpose was to harness the communicative influence of young users to make ethical and safety education more relatable and accessible (VietNamNet, 2019).

Another notable initiative is the #VaccineSo (“Digital Vaccine”) campaign jointly launched by TikTok Vietnam, the National Cybersecurity Awareness Alliance, UNICEF, VNISA, and other organizations. The campaign focused on three core areas: online safety for adolescents, anti-bullying and anti-harassment measures, and personal data protection. Designed to enhance digital competencies and reduce online vulnerability, #VaccineSo exemplifies how TikTok can be strategically utilized to improve digital resilience among at-risk groups (TikTok, 2022).

3.4. TikTok and community-based action for child protection

Beyond education and awareness, TikTok has contributed to fostering community-based engagement in child protection. Empirical realities demonstrate that knowledge among families and communities regarding children's rights, developmental characteristics, gender-related risks, and prevention strategies remains limited, particularly in remote and underserved areas. Reporting abuse also remains challenging, and many children lack the coping skills and confidence necessary to disclose incidents of harm.

In this context, specialized child-protection accounts on TikTok play a significant role. A representative example is Holly-ann Child Protection (@safe4kids), which produces content teaching children how to avoid abuse, clarifies individual and collective responsibilities in safeguarding minors, and provides practical guidance for parents, educators, and authorities. With over 7,000 followers and 74,000 likes, @safe4kids illustrates how sensitive issues such as child sexual abuse prevention can be communicated effectively through short-form videos that remain engaging for younger audiences.

A prominent large-scale initiative is the campaign “Not Alone - Together for Online Safety,” launched by the Digital Trust Coalition with participation from TikTok, Meta, Google, and multiple civil society organizations. Reaching more than two thousand schools, several technology companies, and surpassing one billion online impressions, the campaign aimed to establish a “digital shield” protecting children from online grooming, exploitation, and abduction (Anh Thơ, 2025).

Alongside these campaigns, a number of hashtags have emerged as focal points for global communities advocating child protection on TikTok. Examining these hashtags offers insight into how users worldwide construct, interpret, and extend conversations regarding online safety, reflecting both public concern and platform-enabled communicative dynamics. Table 1 summarizes three representative hashtags selected based on their popularity, reach, and community engagement.

Despite the positive developments, communication practices related to child protection remain fragmented in many regions, with limited professional training, insufficient media materials, and inadequate reach at the household level. Given TikTok’s algorithmic distribution system and its ability to stimulate participatory engagement, the platform offers substantial potential to diversify educational content, amplify community voices, and promote humanitarian values aimed at safeguarding children.

Table 1. Representative TikTok hashtags related to child protection and anti-abuse advocacy

Hashtag	Objectives and Core Focus	Key Features / Evidence of Effectiveness
#protectourchildren	Aims to raise global awareness of child abuse and exploitation, and to encourage communities to share safety-oriented messages.	The hashtag has surpassed 2.1 billion views, demonstrating substantial public attention and high international engagement with child-protection content. (TikTok, n.d.)
#childprotection	Seeks to educate communities about children’s rights, signs of abuse, and essential skills for online safety.	Widely adopted by human-rights organizations, NGOs, and educational accounts; its circulation across TikTok and Instagram illustrates the multi-platform diffusion of child-protection advocacy. (Best-Hashtags, n.d.)
#NoMeCalloChallenge (Save the Children Spain)	Encourages children and adolescents to speak up against violence and abuse, challenging the culture of silence and fostering supportive community environments..	The campaign reached approximately 5.8 million views and generated more than 22.1 million interactions (TikTok for Business), demonstrating the strong viral potential of educational and behavior-change-oriented content. (TikTok, n.d.)

Source: Compiled by the author from publicly available TikTok platform analytics, organizational reports, and secondary data (TikTok, n.d.; Best-Hashtags, n.d.; Save the Children Spain, n.d.).

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study indicate that TikTok has emerged as a highly influential communication platform among children and adolescents, particularly in terms of content reach, algorithmic dissemination, and its potential to shape awareness regarding child protection. However, in the context of increasingly complex forms of child sexual exploitation and abuse, the effectiveness of TikTok as a communication tool depends largely on the extent to which interventions are grounded in empirical evidence and aligned with the platform's operational logic. Based on evidence drawn from document analysis, case studies, and illustrative campaigns and hashtags, several recommendations can be made.

First, because children and adolescents interact with TikTok frequently and intensively, communication strategies must strengthen users' capacity to accurately interpret and engage with safety messages. As demonstrated in Sections 3.1 and 3.3, young audiences respond more effectively to short, visually rich, scenario-based content. Therefore, government agencies and relevant institutions should expand systematic online education efforts and enhance content moderation standards to reduce children's exposure to harmful materials. This recommendation directly reflects findings in Section 3.2, where TikTok's removal of tens of millions of violating videos underscores the critical role of platform-level safety policies.

Second, governmental and non-governmental organizations should assume a more proactive role in producing TikTok-specific educational content. Evidence from the #tienhocle campaign and the @safe4kids account indicates that interactive, scenario-based videos generate significantly higher engagement compared to traditional one-way communication formats. These results support the application of Interactive Communication Theory, as discussed in Section 3.4, highlighting the value of features such as duet, stitch, and comment-based feedback loops for strengthening community participation.

Third, the study emphasizes that child protection on TikTok operates within a broader ecosystem involving families, schools, and communities. Strengthening the digital literacy and protective capacity of parents and caregivers is therefore an evidence-based requirement. As shown through the success of hashtags such as #protectourchildren and #childprotection, parental involvement substantially enhances the early detection of risks and the practical application of safety skills. This aligns with Section 3.3, which identifies multi-stakeholder participation as a critical factor in sustaining effective educational interventions.

Fourth, given children's limited self-protection skills, evidence suggests that TikTok's short-form video format is particularly effective for teaching risk recognition, safety behaviors, and help-seeking strategies. The platform's algorithm enables children to encounter age-appropriate content tailored to their interests, thereby improving message retention and behavioral readiness. These findings reinforce the importance of designing content that explains warning signs, simulates risky scenarios, and provides actionable guidance for different age groups.

The global campaign #ProtectKidsNow further demonstrates TikTok's ability to mobilize large communities in sharing personal stories and prevention experiences. This example illustrates TikTok's dual role as both a channel for delivering educational messages and a digital environment where users co-construct narratives, strengthen public awareness, and

collectively advocate for child protection confirming the relevance of Reception Theory and Social Media Theory for this topic.

In summary, the study concludes that TikTok holds substantial potential as a communication platform for preventing child abuse and exploitation, provided that strategies are evidence-based, audience-responsive, and aligned with platform affordances. When government agencies, civil society organizations, families, and the platform itself work together, TikTok can contribute meaningfully to enhancing community awareness, reducing risks, and promoting the safety and well-being of children in both online and offline environments.

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