



OFFICE of INTELLIGENCE and ANALYSIS

REFERENCE AID

19 APRIL 2021

IA-49252-21

T E R R O R I S M

(U//FOUO) Some Domestic Violent Extremists and Foreign Terrorist Organizations Exploiting TikTok

(U//FOUO) **Scope Note:** This *Reference Aid* examines domestic violent extremists (DVEs) and foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) use of the social media platform TikTok to communicate violent extremist-related content because of the platform's recent increase in popularity, some Homeland Security stakeholders' limited awareness of its functionality, and some stakeholder agencies' recent guidance that their personnel should not download the application due to data privacy concerns. The tactics highlighted in this *Reference Aid* are also relevant to DVE and FTO activity on a variety of other social media platforms.

(U//FOUO) Since at least October 2019, actors promoting violence, including some DVEs and overseas-based individuals linked to FTOs, have used TikTok to recruit adherents, promote violence, and disseminate tactical guidance for use in various terrorist or criminal activities, based on our review of DHS, law enforcement, and open source reporting. Activities advocating or encouraging violence, or promoting violent extremist ideologies, violate TikTok's terms of service, but some DVEs and FTOs are exploiting standard features of the platform to evade the platform's detection and removal efforts.

- (U) Prior to the 6 January US Capitol Complex breach, multiple videos promoting violence were on the platform, including one from a user who posted a video encouraging attendees to bring firearms to Washington, DC. Carrying firearms is illegal in areas of protest activity in DC, and promoting such activity is in violation of TikTok's terms of service, according to reliable open source press reporting.
- (U//FOUO) In early to mid-2020, three identified TikTok users shared separate videos discussing how to sabotage railroad tracks; methods to interfere with the US National Guard during riots; and how to access the White House via tunnels, presumably for use by individuals seeking unlawful access, according to DHS and law enforcement reporting.
- (U) In November 2020, a Pakistani imam was convicted in Paris, France for promoting terrorism on TikTok, according to reliable press reporting. He was sentenced to 18 months in a French jail and will be deported upon completion of his sentence, according to the same sources.

- (U//FOUO) In August 2020, the pro-Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) group “Roma Libera” posted an English-language video to TikTok detailing instructions for manufacturing explosive compounds, according to NCTC reporting. In October 2019, ISIS militants abroad posted videos from 24 TikTok accounts depicting ISIS militants with corpses, guns, and other individuals declaring their support for religiously motivated violence and ISIS, according to fusion center reporting. These TikTok accounts were removed after a newspaper flagged the content for TikTok staff, according to the same fusion center reporting.

(U) Overview of TikTok

(U) TikTok is a Chinese-owned video sharing platform that was launched in the United States in 2017, according to reliable academic and press reporting.^a Globally, TikTok has over 689 million monthly users and over 100 million US monthly users – with the majority of US users between the ages of 10 and 29, according to reliable data and media reporting.

(U) TikTok’s application layout and algorithms can unintentionally aid individuals’ efforts to promote violent extremist content. Users have access to a feed called the “for you page,” which shows content from accounts the user may not follow and contains videos the platform’s algorithm highlights based on the user’s activity. A user’s account may have zero followers but could have substantial viewership on some videos, which could aid violent extremist TikTok users in evading TikTok’s content moderation efforts.

(U) TikTok has implemented limited methods of regulation to enforce its community guidelines, including “shadow-banning” key words associated with violence and conspiracy theories.^b In order to circumvent the “shadow-banning,” some users have used alternate terms not included in the ban, according to reliable open source and fusion center reporting.

(U) TikTok is not currently a part of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT). In late 2019, TikTok’s attempt to join GIFCT was denied due to GIFCT concerns about data privacy relating to TikTok’s Chinese ownership and inability to satisfy GIFCT conditions regarding content removal, according to reliable media reports. In September 2020, TikTok’s interim head sent a letter to the leaders of nine social media companies proposing a coalition to “counter violence and extremism.”

^a (U) The platform was initially available in the United States as Music.ly; Bytedance absorbed Music.ly into TikTok in 2018.

^b (U) Shadow-banning is when content is not removed by the platform, but other users will not be able to discover such content through searches, hashtags, or algorithms.

(U) Domestic Violent Extremists and Foreign Terrorist Organizations Tactics to Avoid Account Removal on TikTok

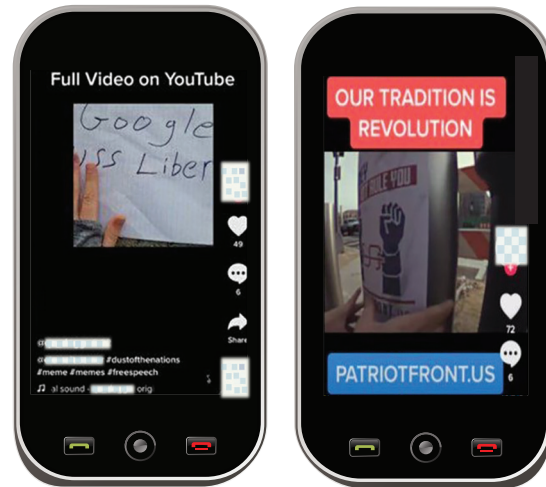
(U//FOUO) Some individuals affiliated with foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) and domestic violent extremists (DVEs) use tactics on the social media application TikTok to evade detection and account removal for community guideline violations. Many of the features highlighted in this product are standard features of the platform and are mostly utilized by non-violent users, but can also be exploited by violent extremists. These tactics are not unique to TikTok, as we have seen them utilized on other social media platforms, as well. The tactics below may involve constitutionally-protected activities that are not necessarily indicative of violent extremist use and should be evaluated in the totality of circumstances.

(U) TACTICS

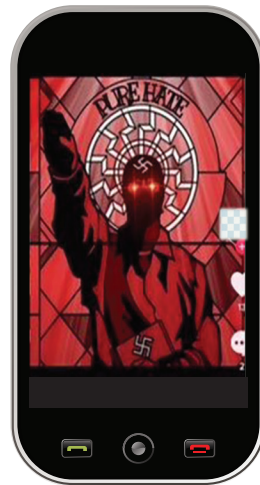
(U) DEPICTION OF TACTICS

(U) OVERVIEW

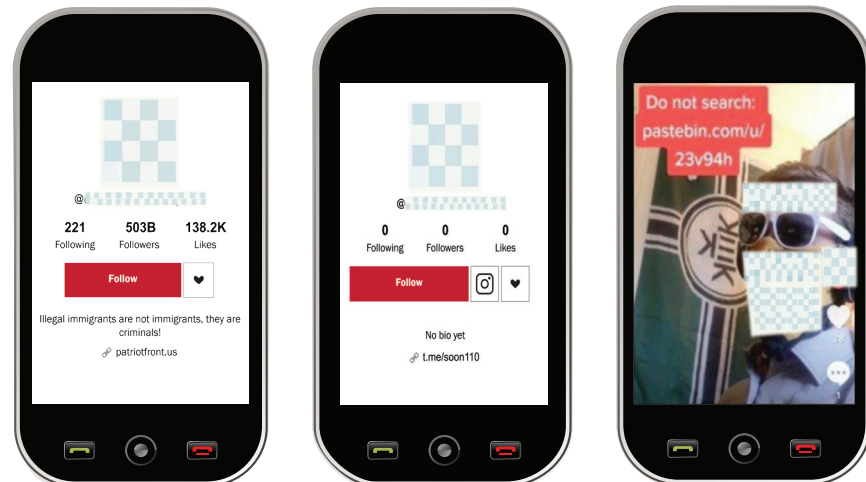
(U) Embedded Text



(U) Embedded Imagery



(U) External Links



- (U//FOUO) Violent extremists covertly place text within video content, known as embedding, to share messaging with targeted audiences. Embedded text can include typed terms, website names, or phrases, and it can appear in photographed text. This tactic may circumvent TikTok's content moderation efforts because they rely on algorithms focused on text found in a video's caption.
- (U//FOUO) For example, some racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVE) posted videos to TikTok with their group's website name embedded in the videos, likely attempting to get viewers to visit their website.

- (U//FOUO) Violent extremists can also covertly place images, graphics, or symbols into their video in an attempt to evade removal for community guideline violations.
- (U//FOUO) For example, violent extremist accounts have posted videos to TikTok with swastikas, which is a violation of TikTok's terms of service. Typically, these individuals will use unrelated or non-specific hashtags or captions to circumvent TikTok's content moderation.

- (U//FOUO) Violent extremists can place links to external sites and potentially avoid detection by artificial intelligence and human content moderators by embedding the link within their video or including links to external sites in their profile's biography.
- (U//FOUO) For example, at least one RMVE TikTok user posted a video with an embedded text link to an external anti-Semitic Pastebin website.⁶ It is against TikTok's community guidelines for account holders to engage or be associated with hate speech or violent extremism on TikTok, which includes promoting links to external sites that glorify such content.
- (U//FOUO) ISIS-affiliated accounts have included links to external websites and messaging platforms, such as ISIS-linked Hoop and Telegram channels, in their profile's biography.

⁶(U//FOUO) Pastebin is an online platform where users can store plain text.

Source, Reference, and Dissemination Information

Definitions

(U//FOUO) **Domestic Violent Extremists (DVEs):** An individual based and operating primarily within the United States or its territories without direction or inspiration from a foreign terrorist group or other foreign power who seeks to further political or social goals, wholly or in part, through unlawful acts of force or violence. The mere advocacy of political or social positions, political activism, use of strong rhetoric, or generalized philosophic embrace of violent tactics does not constitute extremism and may be constitutionally protected. DVEs can fit within one or multiple categories of ideological motivation and can span a broad range of groups or movements. I&A utilizes this term synonymously with "domestic terrorist."

(U//FOUO) **Militia Violent Extremists (MVEs):** Groups or individuals who facilitate or engage in acts of unlawful violence directed at federal, state, or local government officials or infrastructure in response to their belief that the government deliberately is stripping Americans of their freedoms and is attempting to establish a totalitarian regime. These individuals consequently oppose many federal and state authorities' laws and regulations, particularly those related to firearms ownership, and often belong to armed paramilitary groups. They often conduct paramilitary training designed to violently resist perceived government oppression or to violently overthrow the US Government.

(U//FOUO) **Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremist (RMVE):** Groups or individuals who facilitate or engage in acts of unlawful violence or intent to intimidate or coerce the federal government, ethnic and racial minorities, or non-Christian faiths, and often specifically Jewish persons, in support of their belief in the inferiority of nonwhites and non-Christians.

(U//FOUO) **RMVE-White Supremacist (RMVE-WS):** Individual(s) and/or group(s) who facilitate, attempt to engage in, or engage in acts of unlawful violence dangerous to human life or potentially destructive of critical infrastructure or key resources and directed at ethnic minorities, Jewish persons, or government officials or entities in support of the belief that Caucasians are intellectually and morally superior to other races and perceive that the US and other Western governments are secretly controlled by Jewish persons. Some white supremacist extremists may also engage in violence against individuals, regardless of ethnicity or religion, opposed to their views.

(U//FOUO) **Misinformation:** Use of false or misleading information. Misinformation overlaps with some elements of propaganda; it is broader than disinformation because it targets a wide audience rather than a specific group.

Privacy, Civil Rights, Civil Liberties, Intelligence Oversight Notice

(U//FOUO) US persons linking, citing, quoting, or voicing the same arguments raised by some of these FTOs and DVEs are likely engaging in First Amendment-protected activity, unless they are acting at the direction or control of a FTO or DVE threat actor. Furthermore, variants of the topics covered in this product, even those that include divisive terms, should not be assumed to reflect FTO or DVE influence or malign activity absent information specifically attributing the content to malign FTOs and DVEs. This information should be considered in the context of all applicable legal and policy authorities to use open source information while protecting privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties.

Reporting Suspicious Activity

(U) To report suspicious activity, law enforcement, Fire-EMS, private security personnel, and emergency managers should follow established protocols; all other personnel should call 911 or contact local law enforcement. Suspicious activity reports (SARs) will be forwarded to the appropriate fusion center and FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force for further action. For more information on the Nationwide SAR Initiative, visit <http://nsi.ncirc.gov/resources.aspx>.

Dissemination	<i>(U)</i> DHS leadership, cleared federal, state, and local officials, counterterrorism and law enforcement officials, as well as private sector partners.
Warning Notices & Handling Caveats	<p><i>(U)</i> Warning: This document is UNCLASSIFIED//FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY (U//FOUO). It contains information that may be exempt from public release under the Freedom of Information Act (5 U.S.C. 552). It is to be controlled, stored, handled, transmitted, distributed, and disposed of in accordance with DHS policy relating to FOUO information and is not to be released to the public, the media, or other personnel who do not have a valid need to know without prior approval of an authorized DHS official. State and local homeland security officials may share this document with authorized critical infrastructure and key resource personnel and private sector security officials without further approval from DHS.</p> <p><i>(U)</i> All US person information has been minimized. Should you require US person information on weekends or after normal weekday hours during exigent and time sensitive circumstances, contact the Current and Emerging Threat Watch Office at 202-447-3688, CETC.OSCO@HQ.DHS.GOV. For all other inquiries, please contact the Homeland Security Single Point of Service, Request for Information Office at DHS-SPS-RFI@hq.dhs.gov, DHS-SPS-RFI@dhs.sgov.gov, DHS-SPS-RFI@dhs.ic.gov.</p>



Product Title:

All survey responses are completely anonymous. No personally identifiable information is captured unless you voluntarily offer personal or contact information in any of the comment fields. Additionally, your responses are combined with those of many others and summarized in a report to further protect your anonymity.

1. Please select partner type: and function:

2. What is the highest level of intelligence information that you receive?

3. Please complete the following sentence: "I focus most of my time on:"

4. Please rate your satisfaction with each of the following:

	Very Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied	N/A
Product's overall usefulness	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Product's relevance to your mission	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Product's timeliness	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Product's responsiveness to your intelligence needs	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5. How do you plan to use this product in support of your mission? (Check all that apply.)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Drive planning and preparedness efforts, training, and/or emergency response operations | <input type="checkbox"/> Initiate a law enforcement investigation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Observe, identify, and/or disrupt threats | <input type="checkbox"/> Initiate your own regional-specific analysis |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Share with partners | <input type="checkbox"/> Initiate your own topic-specific analysis |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Allocate resources (e.g. equipment and personnel) | <input type="checkbox"/> Develop long-term homeland security strategies |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Reprioritize organizational focus | <input type="checkbox"/> Do not plan to use |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Author or adjust policies and guidelines | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: <input type="text"/> |

6. To further understand your response to question #5, please provide specific details about situations in which you might use this product.

7. What did this product not address that you anticipated it would?

8. To what extent do you agree with the following two statements?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N/A
This product will enable me to make better decisions regarding this topic.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This product provided me with intelligence information I did not find elsewhere.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

9. How did you obtain this product?

10. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up conversation about your feedback?

To help us understand more about your organization so we can better tailor future products, please provide:

Name: <input type="text"/>	Position: <input type="text"/>
Organization: <input type="text"/>	State: <input type="text"/>
Contact Number: <input type="text"/>	Email: <input type="text"/>



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