

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:

FINDING QUEER TIKTOK

Over six months, we've spoken to young people aged between 11 and 19 at three workshops held in Brighton and Southampton.

Using the data collected from **you**, our participants, we have prepared the following summary of findings.

This summary includes recommendations and suggestions for schools and organisations looking to support online safety and wellbeing for young people.



University of
Southampton

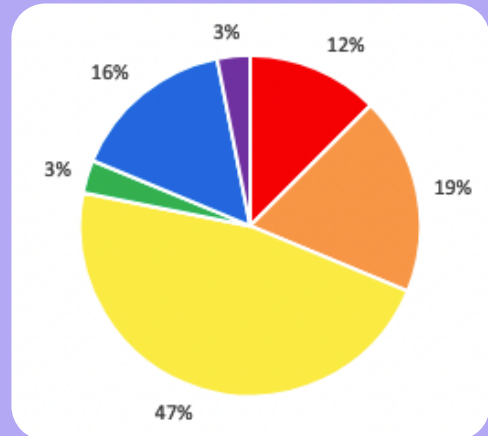
HOW YOU USE TIKTOK



We asked you questions about your day-to-day use of TikTok...

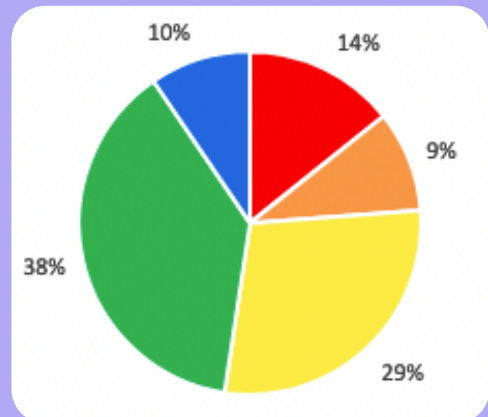
What do you do on TikTok?

- 12% said 'Comment'
- 19% said 'Message/DM'
- 47% said 'Scroll'
- 3% said 'Procrastinate'
- 16% said 'Upload (Original)'
- 3% said 'Upload (Duet)'



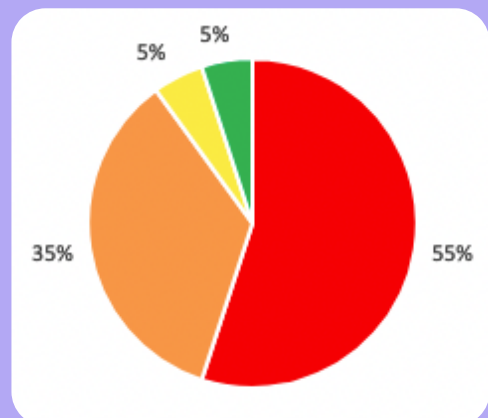
How long have you used TikTok?

- 14% said 'Less than 1 year'
- 9% said '1 to 2 years'
- 29% said '3 to 4 years'
- 38% said '5 to 6 years'
- 10% said 'More than 6 years'



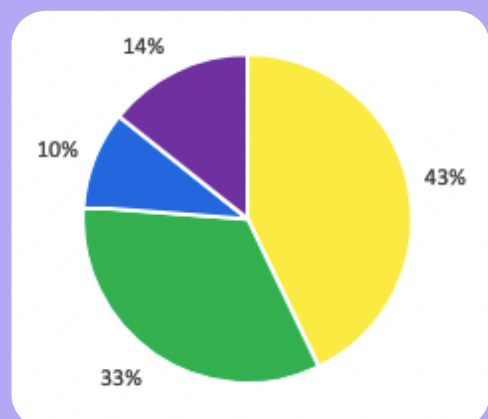
Is your TikTok profile public or private?

- 55% said 'Public'
- 35% said 'Private'
- 5% said 'I don't have one'
- 5% said 'One public, one private'



How many followers do you have?

- 43% said 'Less than 50'
- 33% said 'Less than 500'
- 10% said 'Less than 1,000'
- 14% said '1,000 or more'



WHAT WE LEARNT ABOUT YOU

TikTok is not single issue

You had a wide variety of interests that you engaged with on TikTok: cosplay and fan art, fashion and home design, music and gaming, activism, and discussion about current events.

Some of you used accounts for different purposes, using a separate profile for study tips, or to learn a new language. The content that matters to you most is people sharing their excitement, interests and knowledge.

You learn new things from TikTok

Using the platform can help you to learn about other LGBTQ+ identities, neurodivergencies, and personal backgrounds. You can find other people like you, or those who share similar experiences.

You prefer to scroll than create content

Some of you spend a lot of time on TikTok (upwards of 30 hours a week!) and most of your time is spent scrolling via the For You Page (FYP). You told us that if you do create content, it is usually spontaneous - for example, if something funny happens and you want to share it with friends. Some of you were unsure about posting content publicly, as you felt that you may regret it in the future.

“I LEARNT FROM MISTAKES AS A 12-YEAR-OLD THAT I’M NOW MOSTLY ANONYMOUS”

A vibrant rainbow graphic with multiple overlapping bands of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple, looping from the top left corner towards the center of the page.

The algorithm can be confusing

You told us that finding specific answers on TikTok can be difficult. You know how to ‘train’ your FYP to get the content you want but using the search bar is not very helpful.

[TIKTOK CAN] “FORCE NEW STUFF ON YOU, A COMPLETE 180”

Sometimes the algorithm sends you content you don’t want, but some of you said your FYP can give you content that seems tailored to your recent conversations or searches. It can feel like the algorithm knows you really well.

You told us you found fake accounts that re-create videos of the people or influencers you follow, which can be frustrating. However, you know that you can click ‘Not Interested’ or report these accounts.


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You are critical about the content you see

Many of you spoke about trying to find reliable news and information sources on TikTok. You know that content might be misleading or contain false information and it’s useful to question it.

It’s neither good nor bad

We heard that many of you have a ‘love-hate’ relationship with TikTok. It can be great, but it can also be draining. It’s not as simple as one or the other.

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WHAT YOU TAUGHT US

We know that general advice around online safety includes suggestions such as 'don't put your photos online' and 'don't have a public profile' but you told us that looking after your wellbeing online is far more complicated than that.

Your experiences suggest that some guidelines about online safety are outdated. From what you have told us, there are many things that schools and organisations working with young people can be doing to support you more effectively.

You also mentioned several strategies you use to take care of your wellbeing online. These suggestions are helpful for other young people using TikTok, or other social media platforms.

Here are some of the things we learnt from you...

Online safety is about:

- **Understanding that abuse can follow you**
 - Trolls and malicious accounts are capable of harrassing you, even when your profile is private
 - Knowing how to block accounts or replies is helpful, if you are being targeted



- **Knowing when to leave**

- When people get things wrong, or post hateful comments, you don't have to carry on arguing with them.

“AT SOME POINT, TROLLS JUST STOP”

- **Being strategic about what you post or display publicly**

- Consider what information is visible in your bio or profile picture as some participants noted this seemed to be a key part of how trolls identified and targeted people.

- **Sharing messages with other people**


- If you're receiving hateful content or messages, share it with your friends or someone you trust. You can come up with a solution, or the right wording, together.

Looking after your wellbeing can include:

- **Taking a break (for longer than a night)**

- A few weeks, or even months, off TikTok can be helpful. It's also ok to delete your account and start again.

- **Understanding the limits of TikTok**

- The TikTok algorithm isn't all-knowing. If we get hateful content, we haven't done something wrong.
 - We can't rely on TikTok to give us the truth. If we're unsure, we can find answers elsewhere.
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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOLS AND ORGANISATIONS

Our participants indicated that they felt **adults are not listening to young people about their experiences of social media and online spaces.** (This is demonstrated on TikTok by the use of the hashtag #okboomer, which is used to deliver a tongue-in-cheek message to adult users who don't understand the platform!)

We recommend that schools and organisations working with young people facilitate more conversations about social media. Open discussions about social media platforms, which acknowledge the positive and negative aspects of their use can offer more opportunities for young people to share difficult experiences. **This can be as simple as asking: 'what's the best thing you learned on TikTok this week?'**

Many of our participants told us they felt it was too risky to be open about their LGBTAQ+ identities online. Experiences of harassment and trolling were often isolating and distressing. **Facilitating conversations and opportunities to report and seek support in dealing with online harassment is essential.** Spaces for peer support can help reduce feelings of isolation and reassure young people their experiences are not unique.

Social media is, most often, the place where young people access information about current events. Discussions around this content can be informative, and an exercise in critical analysis. **We were impressed by the variety of skills that young people employ when using TikTok.** The platform can equip young people with practical knowledge of social media management, marketing, directing, scriptwriting, and video editing, as well a space to refine their performance skills.

A FINAL NOTE

Finding Queer TikTok was a year-long project funded by the British Academy/Leverhulme Small Research Grants scheme (SRG2223\230677).

If you are interested in collaborating on future research or knowledge exchange on this, or related topics, please get in touch with Dr Lizzie Reed, the project lead, via email: e.h.reed@soton.ac.uk

Thank you to our external partners and all of our participants.

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