

US expert: TikTok causes more serious harm than Douyin

A US social media expert says TikTok is seriously harmful to Western children, far different from the Chinese version of Douyin.

"TikTok is doing serious damage to Western kids, while the Chinese version is very different, more social, and doesn't affect their younger generation," said Jonathan Haidt, a New York University professor and social media expert.

The statement referred to Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok. Both are owned by ByteDance but operate independently. TikTok is headquartered in Singapore and the US, while Douyin operates under strict control of Chinese authorities.

Douyin users are generally older than TikTok users, and the app has also implemented a number of measures to reduce internet addiction. Douyin has a "youth mode" that limits users under 14 to 40 minutes of use per day, locking access from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. The content that can be found through the search function for those aged 14 to 18 is also limited. Douyin claims to promote useful general knowledge content and educational materials in youth mode.

These changes began in 2021, when the Chinese government introduced a series of measures to limit children's online time.



Douyin logo displayed on smartphone. Photo: Reuters

In the US, TikTok says it has 'robust protections' to block anyone suspected of being underage. 'We have implemented safety features like default time limits, family pairings, and default privacy for minors,' a TikTok spokesperson has repeatedly said. By default, the app limits access to 60 minutes per day for those under 18.

Attorneys general from 14 US states are suing TikTok for child abuse and mental health harm. Investigation documents reveal TikTok executives knew their algorithm was highly addictive and could harm children.

Professor Haidt believes that apps like TikTok affect young people's ability to concentrate, hindering opportunities for growth and creativity. "TikTok has a negative impact on the development of young people. This is a major threat to the national security of the United States in particular and the West in general," he said.

TikTok currently has 170 million users in the US, accounting for half the population, and is a major partner for service providers in data storage, applications, or marketing services. In April 2024, Joe Biden signed into law the Protecting Americans from Foreign-Controlled Apps Act (PAFACA), requiring TikTok to cut ties with its Chinese parent company ByteDance or be banned entirely by January 20.

The platform went offline in the US on January 19 but was back online about 12 hours later. US President Donald Trump signed an executive order on January 20 postponing the ban for 75 days. TikTok said it would work with Trump to find a "long-term solution to keep TikTok in the US".

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