

Europe Accuses TikTok of ‘Addictive Design’ and Pushes for Change

European Union regulators said the app’s infinite scroll and personalized algorithm led to “compulsive” behavior, especially among children.



By Adam Satariano
Reporting from London

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TikTok’s endless scroll of irresistible content, tailored for each person’s tastes by a well-honed algorithm, has helped the service become one of the world’s most popular apps.

Now European Union regulators say those same features that made TikTok so successful are most likely illegal.

On Friday, the regulators released a preliminary decision that TikTok’s infinite scroll, auto-play features and recommendation algorithm amount to an “addictive design” that violates European Union laws for online safety. The service poses potential harm to the “physical and mental well-being” of users, including minors and vulnerable adults, the European Commission, the 27-nation bloc’s executive branch, said in a statement.

The findings suggest TikTok must overhaul the core features that made it a global phenomenon, or risk major fines. European officials said it was the first time that a legal standard for social media addictiveness had been applied anywhere in the world.

“TikTok needs to change the basic design of its service,” the European Commission said in a statement.

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TikTok said it planned to challenge the findings “through every means available to us.”

“The commission’s preliminary findings present a categorically false and entirely meritless depiction of our platform,” the company said in a statement.

TikTok and other social media companies are under mounting global pressure, including facing Big Tobacco-inspired lawsuits in the United States for hooking young users, and efforts in Denmark, France, Malaysia and Spain to bar younger teenagers from the platforms.

Regulators accused TikTok, owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, of disregarding signs

that it was being used compulsively, including available data about the time that minors spend on the platform at night and the frequency that users open the app. TikTok rewards users with new content, regulators said, encouraging them to keep scrolling and putting their brains into “autopilot.”

TikTok, which has more than 200 million users in Europe, should limit infinite scroll features, create new screen-time limits and change its recommendation system, the European Commission said.

No timeline was given on when the authorities will make a final decision in the case. TikTok now has a chance to respond to the allegations. It faces potential fines of up to 6 percent of its global revenue for violations of an E.U. law called the Digital Services Act.

“Social media addiction can have detrimental effects on the developing minds of children and teens,” Henna Virkkunen, an executive vice president of the European Commission, said in a statement. European law, she said, “makes platforms responsible for the effects they can have on their users.”

TikTok has been under E.U. investigation since 2024 for the “rabbit hole effect” it has on users, particularly young people. A Pew Research Center report last year found that 16 percent American teenagers said they were on TikTok “almost constantly.”

The findings of European regulators are similar to allegations made in various American lawsuits that claim features like endless feeds, automatically played videos and personalized recommendations have led to compulsive use and caused depression, eating disorders and self-harm among young people.

TikTok agreed to settle a lawsuit in Los Angeles last month just before trial. It was the first of a series of cases expected to be heard this year against the company, as well as Meta, YouTube and Snap. The suits have been filed by thousands of individuals, school districts and state attorneys general. The companies have denied the allegations and say there is not a clear link between social media use and addiction.

The platforms have also been drawing tougher scrutiny from European leaders. This week, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez of Spain said much stiffer oversight was needed, vowing to ban social media for children under 16 and to hold tech executives criminally liable for illicit content spread on their platforms.

“Social media has become a failed state,” he said in a speech, adding, “We are fighting back.”

The European Commission is known as a leading regulator of the tech industry, with policies that often reverberate globally. For years, the European Union has clamped down on the industry for anticompetitive behavior, disinformation, divisive content and privacy-invading business models.

European officials have taken recent steps to dial back certain aspects of tech regulation, but social media has remained a priority. In December, the commission fined Elon Musk’s social media platform, X, 120 million euros, or about \$140 million, for violating online transparency rules.

The European Union's social media policies have drawn criticism from the Trump administration, which has accused the bloc of unfairly targeting American companies. The dispute has turned into a wider debate about free speech and who sets the rules for platforms that operate across borders.

European officials have pointed to the TikTok investigation as a sign its regulatory scrutiny extends beyond American companies.

TikTok's owner, ByteDance, has been facing other challenges. Last month, it struck a deal with a group of non-Chinese investors to create an American TikTok, concluding a yearslong legal saga in the United States. The agreement was intended to address concerns that Beijing could use the app to surveil or manipulate its U.S. users.

Jeanna Smialek contributed reporting from Brussels.

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