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Executive Summary
The PrE on TikTok

Analysis and recommendations for media
professionals and P/CVE specialists.

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Authors: Dr. Friedhelm Hartwig, Selina Gehring, Elena Jung

modus | zad

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Executive Summary: The PrE on TikTok 2024. Analysis and recommendations for media professionals and P/CVE specialists.

This executive summary outlines the most important findings from the current report "The PrE on TikTok 2024. Analysis and recommendations for media professionals and P/CVE specialists".[1] The analysis focuses on actors, types of channels, formats, strategies, and central themes and narratives from which recommendations for media professionals and P/CVE specialists can be made. The report builds on the findings of the five-part series of handouts for P/CVE specialists and multipliers produced by the modus|zad monitoring team on behalf of the Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung/bpb) in 2020. The recommendations for YouTube developed in the series of handouts can largely be applied to TikTok.

As TikTok features a greater variety of actors than YouTube, the list of channels has been expanded to include influencers from popular culture. This extended frame of reference opens up a more comprehensive qualitative content analysis in which negotiation processes and conflicts become more apparent.

Actors, types of channels, formats, and strategies

The primary goal for the majority of actors is to build and maintain the largest possible community across different social media platforms. Popular platforms such as TikTok serve as the ideal media from which to redirect interested parties via accessible means to platforms that allow more radical content (e.g. Twitter/X, Discord).

While the older generation of established actors prefers using TikTok as a secondary platform for their content followed by YouTube, the younger generation uses TikTok as their primary platform for posting content.

The top third of the 60 most followed channels on TikTok is made up of young preachers and influencers from popular culture. Well-known Salafist preachers who have been active for a long time on social media are further down the list.

There is a more diverse range of actors on TikTok than on YouTube, meaning that well-known YouTube preachers have to keep up with younger competition.

In addition, influencers from popular culture with a large number of followers, and preachers who represent their own religious, political, and social interpretations have established themselves on TikTok. Therefore, there is still competition over interpretive authority, resulting in controversial debates and positions within the community that rarely feature on YouTube.

The high number of Salafist channels which 'mirror'[2] content from other channels and in which the actors remain anonymous very likely seem to serve as a means of increasing their presence, and thus their authority to interpret Islam on TikTok.

Despite the high number of anonymous channels, individual preachers and influencers receive the most attention. What is striking on TikTok, compared to YouTube which is largely male dominated, is the widespread presence of female preachers and influencers as well as videos in which Muslim couples appear together.

Many leading channels (in terms of the number of followers) present their messages in an anonymised storytelling format, supported by AI-generated picture sequences or motifs such as anime from popular culture. Although there are more channels with visible actors, these anonymised formats also have a high reach (> 95.5K).

Interviews, live chats and campaigns make up a larger proportion of videos on TikTok than on YouTube. Since the Hamas massacre on 7th October 2023 and the ongoing war in Gaza, the monitoring team has registered a wave of videos about demonstrations and calls for a boycott of Israel. Online actors view TikTok as an important medium for mobilisation.

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2   Many Salafist TikTok channels just show (mirror) video content of well-known Salafist preachers from other channels and platforms.

Central themes and narratives

Aside from the cluster of Salafist channels on TikTok, the actors display a diffuse mixture of conservative Islamic or fundamentalist moral and value judgements. The focal points of these channels are, however, as individual as the respective characters.

Since the 7th of October 2023 there has been a clear trend: much of the recommended content on TikTok includes calls to boycott Israel, protests the war in Gaza, anti-Zionist propaganda as well as antisemitic content. A majority of the actors supports calls for a boycott as well as the allegations against Israel, for example of apartheid, genocide, and war crimes. Their aim is often to prove that Israel alone is culpable. Most of the actors emphasise, however, that they do not blame Jews in general, but rather the far-right and Zionist politics of the government along with settler groups calling for a 'Greater Israel'. Only very few actors are in favour of resolving the conflict by means of a caliphate.

The current range of topics mainly focus on core issues that serve to contextualise and interpret the conflict in the Middle East, e.g. colonialism, Zionism, and the war on terror.

With regard to Germany, numerous actors propagate the idea of an alleged decades-long agitation against Islam, which is controlled, for example, by government agencies, the establishment media, academia or civil society organisations. These accusations are often linked to experiences of discrimination, incidents of anti-Muslim racism, and racially motivated terror attacks against Muslims in Germany.

There are widespread accusations of manipulation, cover ups, and Islamophobia against the establishment media. In contrast, social media is purported to be where you find the truth and reliable reporting. It is held up as the central tool for creating a new consciousness among the population and fundamentally shifting the prevailing mood.

Recommendations for content creators

1   As TikTok videos lend themselves well to conveying emotion, presenting polarising ideas as well as easily digestible introductions to topics, a short, fast narrative-style should be observed for relaying fact-based content.[3] It could also be possible to overlay existing content, which could then be categorised, or fact checked. This can serve as a basis for other expressions of opinion. A script with clear, simple language based on that of the existing videos can also help to appeal to the same community.

2   In addition, the search function on TikTok can be used to find the correct keywords for the videos and captions. An independent search can be used to determine which terms and topics are entered most frequently.

3   The variations in content and video format show that there is a wide scope for developing content; from the classic talking heads format to TikTok videos made from AI-generated snippets and stock footage. The popularity of preachers and content creators does, however, mean that talking heads is a recommended format. Personality, likeability and an authentic appearance are all important qualities for this format. A hybrid form of the channel would also be conceivable: a host for the videos with a personalised approach, reactions and emotions as well as a format container with voice-over and stock footage/animations/AI material for quick explanations and background information.

4   The reaction video format is also recommended when creating TikTok videos. The platform functions 'stitch' and 'duet' can be used to quote and comment on videos of other users. In doing so, a network is created between different user groups and the videos achieve a higher reach.

5   When developing the format, the target group should be defined after the existing content has been analysed in detail. It is also useful to review the creators' comments section as well as the producers' approach to target group engagement.

6   In addition, there is big potential in moderating the comments section. Some content creators are switching to other services which are less restrictive regarding radical content in order to engage with their community. Contributing to discussions, contradicting false statements, and showing gratitude for appreciation in the comments section can help in building and maintaining a dedicated channel audience.

7   TikTok now allows longer videos, therefore a lot of PrE content on YouTube is also available on TikTok. While with the introduction of YouTube Shorts some years ago one could talk about a 'TikTokisation', there is now a (great) tendency to the 'YouTubeisation' of TikTok.

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3   Cf. the numerous examples in the detailed report.

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