

# How Marketers Are Responding to Recent TikTok Headlines

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Though TikTok has become a craze among some younger Americans over the past year, recent headlines about a US government investigation into the platform's Chinese parent company ByteDance regarding national security concerns have some marketers worrying.

It was **reported** that the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) launched an investigation into ByteDance over its purchase of the US app Musical.ly, as well as any potential censorship of content and collection of data about US social media users.

"For advertisers on the conservative end of the brand safety spectrum, the press around the national security investigation certainly merits a discussion," said Emily Anthony, senior director of media services at marketing agency Merkle.

Trust is "paramount" for advertisers who are focused on personalization efforts, and data security would be a "universal consideration for advertisers in the evaluation of media partnerships," she said.

An executive at a major advertising agency said that some clients have grown concerned about brand safety on TikTok. The executive spoke

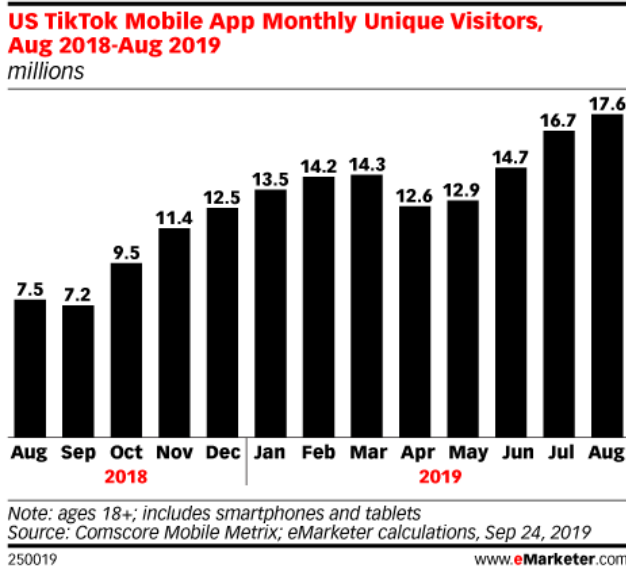
with us under the condition of anonymity because of potential sensitivities around investigations into the platform.

“TikTok is rapidly growing, but as a platform it still has a level of immaturity to it regarding questions like brand safety,” the executive said, adding that while brand safety can be a “significant issue” on all digital platforms, it’s especially true for TikTok.

The charges of political censorship and potential connection to the Chinese government are also under consideration. “We live in an age where more and more of what marketers and brands do gets viewed through a political lens, and I think it’s important that brands spend a bit of time understanding what those implications are,” the executive said.

ByteDance acquired the Musical.ly video app in 2017, merged it with TikTok, and relaunched the combined entity in August 2018, keeping the name TikTok.

In the past year, TikTok has risen in popularity in the US, particularly among teens. According to [Comscore](#), TikTok had 17.6 million US mobile app unique visitors ages 18 and older in August 2019, a 135% increase from August 2018.



While TikTok is not nearly as popular as Instagram and YouTube, teens ages 13 to 16 are just as likely to use TikTok as Facebook and Twitter, according to September 2019 survey data from Morning Consult.

“Consumer usage continues to grow, and for relevant clients, it’s an interesting place to be,” said Noah Mallin, head of content and experience at media agency Wavemaker US. News of the investigation hasn’t impacted Wavemaker’s short-term plans for TikTok, but that could change depending on the outcome of the investigation. “But for now, it seems to be status quo,” he said.

“TikTok has a lot of appeal for marketers that want to reach the youth audience, but they shouldn’t go blindly into partnerships with the app,” said eMarketer principal analyst Debra Aho Williamson. “Marketers should ask TikTok hard questions about what it does with user data and how it approaches content moderation. Then, they should ask themselves if they are comfortable with the answers they receive.”

News of the investigation broke after Sens. Tom Cotton (R-AK) and Chuck Schumer (D-NY) [sent a letter](#) to the acting director of National Intelligence last month, expressing concern that Beijing-based ByteDance’s adherence to Chinese law poses a risk to the US. The senators cited security experts who have “voiced concerns that China’s vague patchwork of intelligence, national security and cybersecurity laws compel Chinese companies to support and cooperate with intelligence work controlled by the Chinese Communist Party.”

Prior to that, Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL) [requested](#) a similar investigation citing comparable security concerns, referencing [reporting](#) that ByteDance may be censoring content related to ongoing political unrest in Hong Kong.

In an October 2019 [statement](#), TikTok said it does not operate in China, and that it stores US user data in the US. It also denied that the Chinese government ever requested content removal, and stated it wouldn’t comply if asked. The company [followed up](#) in November by publishing an explainer on how it approaches content moderation and data security.

For more analysis on TikTok, eMarketer PRO subscribers can read our recent report, published prior to news of the US government investigations.

**Report** by Debra Aho Williamson Oct 30, 2019

## Marketing on TikTok

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