

TikTok ‘heating’ revelation suggests the platform isn’t as algorithmically driven as many thought

Article

The news: TikTok employees regularly engage in “heating,” a manual push that ensures specific videos “achieve a certain number of video views,” according to current and former

employees of the platform and its parent **ByteDance** as well as documents reviewed by Forbes.

- In many ways, this is a form of editorial oversight being exercised on a platform known for being algorithmically driven. The algorithm has become part of TikTok's brand.

How it works: Staff at TikTok and ByteDance have the ability to secretly handpick specific videos and supercharge their distribution, according to the Forbes sources.

- The heating feature refers to boosting videos in the For You feed through manual intervention to increase their viewership, an internal TikTok document titled "MINT Heating Playbook" explains.
- In response to the Forbes story, a TikTok spokesperson told us that only a few individuals, based in the US, have the ability to approve content for promotion in the US, and that content makes up approximately .002% of videos in For You feeds.

Why it matters: For years, TikTok has described its powerful For You page as a personalized feed ranked by an algorithm that predicts users' interests based on their behavior in the app.

"Up-and-coming creators have flocked to the platform in hopes of achieving 'TikTok fame,' which relies on the belief any piece of well-timed content can go viral," said principal analyst **Jasmine Enberg**. "The knowledge that TikTok can handpick content to promote puts a major wrench in that story. TikTok can't afford to alienate creators, as they are what makes both their ad and commerce businesses tick."

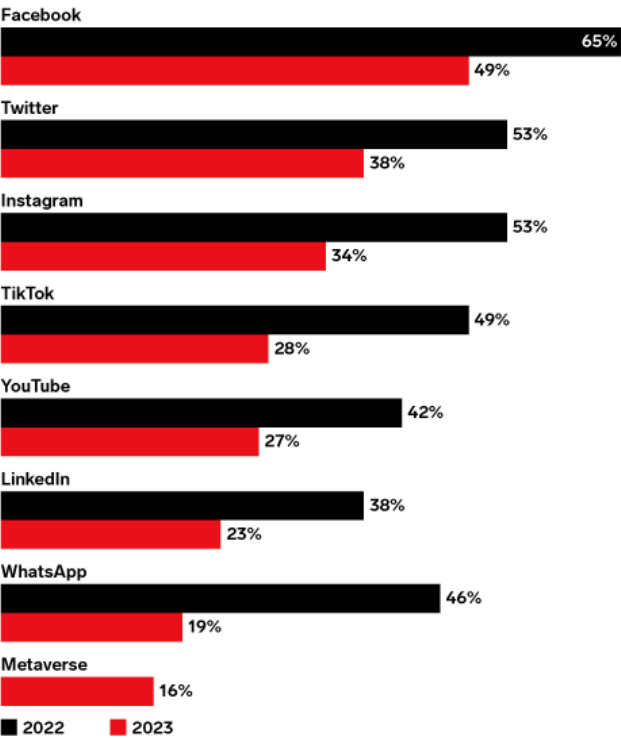
Our take: Heating has likely benefitted some influencers and brands—those with whom TikTok has sought business relationships—at the expense of others. Even if TikTok hasn't engaged in this practice to attract ad dollars or to expressly promote certain accounts, it certainly can give lawmakers and regulators the appearance of impropriety.

- This suggests that at least sometimes, videos on the For You page aren't there because TikTok thinks you'll like them; instead, they're there because the platform wants a particular brand or creator to get more views. Labels are used to identify sponsored content; could a similar approach work to identify posts that have been helped by editorial intervention?

Either way, it's hard to see such a non-disclosure being good for establishing consumer trust.

Platforms US Digital Media Professionals Are Likely to Adjust Media Spend Due to Eroding Consumer Trust, 2022 & 2023

% of respondents



Source: Integral Ad Science (IAS), "The 2023 Industry Pulse Report," Dec 16, 2022
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