

TikTok's Negligence: Creating a Generation of 'Sephora Kids'

Consultants: Lydia Mabamije (Marketing, 2024), Angela Lam-Li (Marketing, 2025), Grace Hubbard (Corporate Innovation and Entrepreneurship, 2026)

Audience: Senior Leadership Team at TikTok US

Executive Summary

In an era characterized by rapid technological advancements, we have also seen the first generation born with digital portals available in their pockets. Few of us have healthy relationships with our phones, but young users are especially vulnerable.

Understanding the behaviors of users aged 13 to 17 online presents a distinct challenge for businesses and parents as young users grapple with developmental challenges related to impulse control, cognitive and moral reasoning, and social awareness. These factors online impact offline behavior in problematic ways, including increased depression but also exemplified by the phenomenon of “Sephora Kids”.

TikTok, a social media platform where users create and share short videos up to a minute in length, sparked a viral trend that drove young users into Sephora stores around the United State demanding luxury skincare products. The trend not only affected the 13–17-year demographic but made headlines across national news outlets highlighting erratic, and potentially unhealthy, behavior of 10–12-year-olds

While parents are often blamed for this negative social situation, this issue is also fundamentally one of business ethics and social responsibility; the behavior of the so-called “Sephora Kids” is symptomatic of TikTok’s ethical negligence to meet reasonable standards of caution related to young users of social media. To repair the damage of this ethical failing, trust between young users of TikTok, the guardians of these young users, and TikTok U.S. as a corporation must be repaired.

Relying on an established “Trust Equation”, we recommend that:

- *Credibility* is established by creating a separate code of conduct that differentiates the guidelines of TikTok’s over-seventeen-year-old platform and TikTok’s under-seventeen-year-old platform.
- *Reliability* is demonstrated through operationalizing a Code of Conduct, guidelines supporting the well-being of young users; stronger reinforcements of appropriate users of the app; and regular updates to the under 17 version of the app to satisfy the highest standards of safety and wellbeing.
- *Intimacy* is established by building a relationship with guardians of young users by developing a weekly ‘Guardian Report’ that tracks top hashtags, accounts, and videos that are trending for each user’s personalized algorithm.
- The risk for TikTok to act in the company’s financial *self-interest*, at the risk of value extraction for other stakeholders, is mitigated through reinforced decision-making processes that do not rely on financial reports as a sole measure of success.