Child-led Technical Research Study Outline & Findings

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MEDIAMONITORING AFRICA

Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) was founded in 1993 and is located in Johannesburg, South Africa. Our mission is to champion ethical journalism that upholds human rights, fostering an environment where both media and influential entities honour human rights while advancing democracy and the principles of justice and fairness. Leveraging technology, social media, and data tools, MMA implements effective media strategies for impactful change.

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Summary

This research was conducted by young people who are part of the Article 12 working group, who act as child online safety ambassadors for Media Monitoring Africa. They explored the features and functionalities of two social media platforms for privacy and safety; TikTok and Instagram.

They found that:

- The range of languages available for the Terms of Service (ToS) on TikTok and Instagram platforms was limited, but easy to find
- The default settings on TikTok did not default to private for 17 year olds, and on Instagram do not match international standards for 17 year olds
- The safety features on TikTok and Instagram are manageable, but require digital literacy and raise questions about the role of parental oversight
- The account deletion processes of TikTok were clear and easy, bit on Instagram could be more streamlined

This report recommends that:

- Language options for Terms of Service be expanded, particularly for African users.
- For users under 18, including South Africa, new accounts made by young people should default to private settings.
- Privacy notices and Terms of Service statements are made more simple.
- Changes be made to the way parents accounts are linked to children's accounts, to prevent potential misuse of parental controls while maintaining necessary safety measures.
- Mobile password reset and account deletion processes are streamlined.
- Placement of the settings menu (the hamburger icon) is made consistent across all pages
- Accessibility of essential features, like data downloads, be improved

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Introduction

On the 21st September 2024 in Johannesburg South Africa, Article 12 Working Group,[1] with the support of trained Media Monitoring Africa (MMA)[2] team members conducted a child-led technical research project that explored children's user-experiences on TikTok and Instagram within the South African context. Their research focused on:

1. The range of languages available for the Terms of Service (ToS) on TikTok and Instagram platforms.
2. The default privacy settings on TikTok and Instagram, with a focus on how these settings affect South Africa children.
3. The safety features on TikTok and Instagram, with a focus on how these features encourage protection and privacy of South Africa children.
4. The account deletion processes of TikTok and Instagram from a user perspective, with a focus on ease of use, clarity, and potential privacy concerns.
5. Providing recommendations on how the TikTok and Instagram can improve children's user-experiences on these platforms - with a special focus on advancing children's right to privacy.

Research methods

The research was conducted by a team of children, the Article 12 Working Group (see figure 1). It was supervised and supported by MMA team members who have expertise in child rights, digital privacy, and child-participatory research methodologies.

In preparation for this study, informed consent from both the child participants and their parents/guardians was obtained.

To prepare Article 12 researchers for the study, an hour long basic introductory sessions covering research ethics and safety, digital privacy concepts, basic technical skills required for the study and data collection and analysis techniques.

Article 12 members were then divided into groups of two to tackle the five technical activities. The process of each technical activity is outlined in detail under Annexure A & B.

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[1]The Article 12 Working Group is made up of Web Ranger ambassadors who have been trained in digital literacy and have a special interest in policy work. All of the Article 12 members are children, ranging in age from 13 to 17 years old. Article 12 members engage in ICT-related policy submissions and discussions that ensure that their voices are heard, and opinions are considered by policymakers and industry leaders. Article 12 members work on submissions to ensure that policies and decisions that affect children are more child-friendly and relevant and relatable to children and their daily lives.
[2]Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) is a non-profit organisation, which seeks to influence the media in ways that promote ethical, responsible and fair media coverage in support of human rights and democracy. MMA has over 30 years experience in media monitoring and direct engagement with media, civil society organisations and citizens.

A range of safeguarding measures were put in place, including:

- All Article 12 participants have parental consent to participant in the study
- MMA and partners ensured that no Article 12 researcher was exposed to harmful content online during the research, as each group of researchers was supervised by an adult researcher who guided each activity
- During the study, Article 12 researchers used test accounts only, clearly marked as "Article 12 Research 1"; and therefore did not interact as real users
- Article 12 researchers, under the guidance of adult researchers, ensured that all test accounts were deleted once the study was complete
- MMA provided a debriefing session for Article 12 researchers

The study acknowledges that there is potential bias introduced by the Article 12 researchers' own digital literacy and experiences, and tests were conducted for accounts for 17 year olds only.

Findings

This research generated four key findings

1. The range of languages available for the Terms of Service (ToS) on TikTok and Instagram platforms was limited, but easy to find

Article 12 researchers reported successful navigation to the language settings across both applications and indicated confidence that other users would be able to locate these settings with similar ease.

TikTok

In examining TikTok's language options, Article 12 researchers identified extensive coverage of European and Asian languages, with American and British English being the top two offerings. There was Kiswahili as the only African language option but generally, a notable absence of South African languages raised the main concern that the platform does not currently support user-suggested language additions.

Instagram

Instagram's language options similarly included a comprehensive coverage of European and Asian languages, with the inclusion of one South African language (Afrikaans) in their language offerings.

2. The default settings on TikTok did not default to private for 17 year olds, and on Instagram do not match international standards for 17 year olds

For each account setup, Article 12 researchers were asked to answer the question *"does a new account for a '17 year old' default to public or private?"*

TikTok

For TikTok, Article 12 researchers noted that there was no prompt to choose between private or public account despite clearly indicating that the user is 17 years old and the account was defaulted to public.

"I'm so disappointed, TikTok doesn't even care to ask us to choose between private and public, once you complete the signing up process, it takes you straight to viewing videos. What about children that don't know anything about keeping their accounts private - what happens to their safety?" – Article 12 Working Group member, Rofhiwa

Instagram

For Instagram, the initial privacy configuration required user choice. Specifically:

- Users must actively choose between private and public settings during account setup as there is no pre-selected default privacy setting provided.
- The platform presents both options (public and private) without visual hierarchy or recommendation, meaning that the private setting option lacks visual emphasis (e.g., no distinctive coloring or highlighting which is usually presented in a blue colour) and therefore does not proactively guide child users toward selecting enhanced privacy settings

While Instagram provides explanatory text on how privacy is defined on the platform, Article 12 researchers noted areas for improvement:

- Current privacy explanations could be simplified for child users
- The platform's disclosure about publicly visible information (profile picture, biography, and mutual followers) requires clear articulation as child users may not fully comprehend the interconnected nature of social media platforms and search engines

"We appreciate the explainer but the part that says 'certain information on your profile like your profile picture and username is visible to everyone on and off Instagram' is not clear, because for the everyday child to understand this statement requires them to understand that social media and the internet are connected i.e when you do a Google on someone and they have social media, their social media accounts will appear." –
Article 12 Working Group member, Tinotenda

Article 12 researchers observed significant disparities in online safety measures on Instagram, highlighting that children in their region do not receive the same level of digital privacy protections as their counterparts in other jurisdictions. As of September 2024, Instagram implemented enhanced privacy protections for users under 18 in select regions:

- Default private accounts introduced in the UK, US, Canada, and Australia
- Content visibility restricted to approved followers[3]

This policy has not been uniformly implemented globally, creating inconsistent protection standards for child users across different jurisdictions.

3. The safety features on TikTok and Instagram are manageable, but require digital literacy and raise questions about the role of parental oversight

For both TikTok and Instagram, key safety features identified by Article 12 researchers include:

- Privacy Controls: Users can customize who interacts with their account and how these interactions occur. However, it's worth noting that effectively using these

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[3]See for example, Liv McMahon, Tom Gerken and Zoe Kleinman 2024 'Instagram boosts privacy and parental control on teen accounts' BBC https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c77x44zplkyo

controls requires a basic understanding of digital tools and settings (digital literacy skills).
- Account Security: The platform uses two-step verification to add an extra layer of protection.
- Device Management: Users can easily see and manage which devices are logged into their account. This means they can quickly spot and remove any unfamiliar devices that might have gained access.
- Regular Security Checks: The system automatically sends security alerts every 7 days, helping users stay on top of their account's safety status without having to manually check.

The family parenting page raised an important point of discussion for the Article 12 researchers, particularly regarding the statement "Choose whether your teen can have a private or public account." Researchers argued that while parental oversight is valuable, giving parents complete control over their child's privacy settings may not be ideal, as some parents might lack the digital literacy skills needed to make well-informed decisions that balance their child's safety with their right to privacy online.

4. The account deletion processes of TikTok were clear and easy, bit on Instagram could be more streamlined

TikTok

Article 12 researchers noted TikTok's straightforward approach to account deletion. The process combines accessibility with appropriate security measures, making it navigable for child users. Key process features noted by the researchers included:

1. Simple navigation to deletion settings
2. Clear choice between deactivation and permanent deletion
3. Option to download personal data before proceeding
4. 30-day deactivation period prior to permanent deletion
5. Email verification for security
6. Multiple confirmation steps to prevent accidents
7. Account deleted as the final step

They also appreciated TikTok's transparency efforts under step 3, where some information about data retention was provided.

Instagram

For Instagram, Article 12 researchers noted that locating the deletion tab was a little complicated when compared to TikTok.

"We had to search in a lot of categories before finding the deletion option. We had to use the search bar to locate it." – Article 12 Working Group member, Motheo

They listed the process as follows:
1. Provides option to either deactivate account or delete account (the meaning and difference between deactivating and deletion was clearly explained)
2. Give the reasons for deleting your account (list of options provided)
3. Requires Password to authenticate the identity of the user
4. Confirm permanent account deletion
5. Account deleted only after 30 days

It is worth noting that when asked for their password, Article 12 researchers forgot their password and the process for resetting password was not user-friendly, the link sent to email inbox was not operating when using a mobile device. The password had to be reset using a laptop.There was concern that this complicated and long process discouraged users from deleting their accounts.

Recommendations

Recommendations on how TikTok and Instagram can improve children's user-experiences on these platforms, with a special focus on advancing children's right to privacy:

- Language Accessibility: There is a significant need to expand language options, particularly for African users. This expansion would ensure more inclusive access and better user understanding of privacy features across diverse communities.

- Enhanced Privacy Protection: For users under 18, particularly in South Africa, by implementing automatic privacy-protective settings during account creation. This proactive approach would significantly improve child safety on these platforms.

- User-Friendly Safety Information: The concept and explanation of privacy on both platforms need simplification. Clear, accessible explanations would empower child users to make more informed decisions about their online privacy and security settings.

- Reimagining Parent-Child Account Connections: Change the parent-child account linking process, to allow for child users to also have the power to initiate account connections during setup, so platforms can better balance parental oversight with youth privacy rights. This approach would also help prevent potential misuse of parental controls while maintaining necessary safety measures.

Recommendations on platform navigation and management to enhance user experience:

- Streamlining mobile password reset and account deletion processes, especially on Instagram

- Maintaining consistent placement of the settings menu (the hamburger icon) across all pages on accounts

- Improving accessibility to essential features like data downloads