

The battle over TikTok: What lies ahead for South African creators?

By [Nick Corbett](#)

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Amidst mounting privacy concerns and a preexisting ban on music usage, TikTok finds itself under scrutiny. What implications does this hold for the beloved app, developed by tech giant ByteDance, and what impact will it have on South African content creators?



Source: www.unsplash.com

With an ultimatum issued by the US over privacy concerns and an existing ban on music usage, TikTok seems to be under attack. What does this mean for the internet's favourite app developed by tech unicorn ByteDance, and how will it affect South African creators?

Stop the scroll for a second

What's going on with TikTok? I don't mean what trending audio is hot this week or which dance challenge is set to a new Beyonce track. Instead, the app is under fire and you may have noticed a change in what music you're able to use. Here's a quick guide to where we are and how we got here.

- Throughout 2023, American, European and Canadian governments have brought motions to limit access to TikTok. According to The New York Times, the US has requested that government employees delete the app from their work phones. Now, lawmakers in America have issued an ultimatum to ban the app entirely if it doesn't "cut ties with its parent company" ByteDance through a forced sale. Why is this happening?
- ByteDance, a Chinese company, owns TikTok and has sparked privacy concerns from the US government. The result? ByteDance has been pressured by the US to divest TikTok or face potential prohibition in the country. This stems from the US government's fears around national security, how data is collected by TikTok, and what happens to it next.
- Your phone transmits sensitive user data, including your IP address, location, contact lists, and payment details, to social media platforms like TikTok. US officials express worries that TikTok could serve as a conduit for the Chinese government to gather intelligence on their citizens. Why? Because Chinese legislation mandates companies to provide data upon government request.
- India has already banned TikTok in its entirety by ordering internet service providers to block a suite of Chinese apps

since 2020.

Was TikTok silent, or silenced?

Some musicians seemed to have vanished from TikTok completely. This comes off the back of Universal Music Group doing something unprecedented – removing its entire artist catalogue from TikTok. For an app that relies on audio for trends and engagement, this is bad news. In a tweet, the dispute arose after the companies' licensing agreement came to an end in January and they failed to come to an agreement on renewing it.



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Universal alleged that TikTok fails to provide “appropriate compensation for our artists and songwriters”, and TikTok fired back that artists benefit from exposure and growth on one of the world’s largest digital platforms.

According to *Variety*, “The standoff between Universal Music Group and TikTok over royalty payments and AI policies has resulted in a near-complete blackout of all music owned, distributed and published by the company on the platform — the videos are still there, but the music is muted.”

What does this mean for creators in South Africa?

With TikTok being attacked on two sides, some things are worth considering when it comes to app usage and monetisation:

- TikTok has seen explosive growth in Mzansi and has rocketed to a share of 30.6% of market penetration. This is second only to Facebook’s long-established 56.7% penetration of South Africans aged 15 and over.
- Modash, a discovery and analytics platform, lists 287 790 South African TikTok influencers, with up to 500k followers. That’s a lot of economic potential.
- A recent IOL report found that almost half of South African consumers “discovered products from trending videos on TikTok, and 44% interact with videos posted by creators on TikTok when deciding to buy a product.”

So let’s talk about what the potential sale and current music dispute means for creators here at home.

When it comes to a ban in the US, we’re a lot safer here down south. There’s been no word from the South African government on supporting the potential ban of TikTok. With the youth unemployment rate reaching a staggering 60.7%, it would be foolish to cut off the income-earning potential of young South Africans. Thousands of creators are already monetising the platform, and there is potential for hundreds of thousands more to follow suit.



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As for a ban in the US, it's not immediately clear how the country would action this. Even if the app is removed from app stores, devices that already have it installed would also still be able to use it. And when it comes to a potential forced sale, even more questions arise: who would buy the app from parent company ByteDance? How much would they need to pay, and how would they defeat existing antitrust laws that are already plaguing big tech companies like Meta and Apple, who are some of the only entities able to afford it? It's as difficult to pinpoint answers as it is to find that clip you loved from two weeks ago.

What to check today if you're a creator

If you're a creator, and you haven't already, go back and check which of your TikToks have been muted because of the music dispute. You'll have the opportunity to slot in a new song or audio track to make sure your content is still getting engagement.

If you're posting on TikTok and looking to use local music, don't expect to find a number of artists who are signed to Universal Music Group. These include Jeremy Loops, Mi Casa, DJ Zinhle, and Cassper Nyovest.

And while a ban won't see the light of day in SA any time soon, it's worth asking the question:

Have the apps on our phones gone from unicorns to Trojan horses? The answer isn't clear, but what we can – and should – do is keep our wits about us, follow reputable news sources and be data-aware in today's online world.

In conclusion, there's nothing to fear when it comes to TikTok vanishing from your phone. Although, it's worth reviewing what you've already created and not being taken by surprise when you can't join in the latest trend with your new favourite tracks. And remember: no scrolling right before bed.

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