

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-3006

Shou Zi Chew
CEO
TikTok
5800 Bristol Parkway
Culver City, CA 90230

September 5, 2023

Dear Mr. Chew,

I write to encourage you to do more to keep our children safe from the rise of a disturbing trend known as “subway surfing,” an extremely dangerous activity in which individuals, usually teenagers, climb outside of a moving subway car and film themselves, often motivated by their desire to gain online clout and followers. This phenomenon is related to a wider “urban exploring” or “urbex” activity in which adolescents visit abandoned and dilapidated buildings and construction sites and sometimes engage in dangerous activities like climbing an unstable structure in order to film the experience.

This online trend has deadly consequences. This summer, a constituent in my district, Jay Thirunarayanapuram, lost his life five days after his fifteenth birthday while subway surfing.¹ His loving parents and friends are devastated, and our world is poorer for our loss of a bright young artist, animal lover and extraordinary young man.

As you are well aware, young people can be especially susceptible to the influence of what they see on social media, however dangerous the suggestions and trends being promoted. Your platform’s design encourages young users to seek out likes and other positive digital reinforcement – at an age when their brain development enables extreme risk-taking behavior, particularly in the company of their peers.²

Though the trend appears to be less pronounced in the region served by the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, which serves my district, media outlets have reported an alarming rise in these dangerous incidents on the East Coast. For example, in New York City, this

¹ Joe Heim, Increase in ‘subway surfing’ deaths prompts calls for safeguards, The Washington Post (Aug. 16, 2023, 6:00 AM), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2023/08/16/subway-surfing-metro-death-mta/>.

² Laurence Steinberg, A social neuroscience perspective on adolescent risk-taking, PubMed (Mar. 28, 2008). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2396566/>.

perilous phenomenon has doubled from pre-pandemic levels, with the city documenting 928 incidents in 2022³ and four deaths in the first six months of this year.⁴

I appreciate your company’s efforts to date to enforce your Community Guidelines that prohibit “showing or promoting dangerous activities and challenges...that may lead to significant physical harm.”⁵ I understand that you have recently taken steps to reduce the proliferation of videos tagged with the “#subwaysurfing” hashtag and have taken down many videos that glorify this risk taking. It is clear that your company dedicates significant resources that include staff and contractor hours, with 40,000 safety professionals, to user safety. These efforts are appreciated, and I urge you to expand and sustain these efforts to curtail subway surfing and similarly dangerous trends—especially given the in-app factors that incentivize young people to maximize views and clicks. My staff was still able to find a variety of subway surfing and related urban exploring videos circulating on TikTok with relative ease.^{6,7}

I respectfully urge you to consider every option available to that can stop this viral trend from spreading further and taking even more young lives in communities across the land.

Very truly yours,

Jamie B. Raskin
Member of Congress

³ Joshua Needelman, 2 Teens’ Deaths Underscore Dangers of ‘Subway Surfing’, N.Y. Times (Feb. 21, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/21/nyregion/subway-surfing-new-york-death.html>.

⁴ Dustin Jones, NYC officials are trying to stop the deadly social media trend of ‘subway surfing,’ NPR (Aug. 17, 2023, 5:01 AM), <https://www.npr.org/2023/08/17/1194223893/subway-surfing-deaths-new-york-city-teens-social-media>.

⁵ *Community Guidelines: Mental and Behavioral Health*, TikTok. <https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/mental-behavioral-health/#3>, (last visited on Sept. 5, 2023).

⁶ @andreifilmzz, doing side quests with bro <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZT8YuGgU1/>

⁷ @andreifilmzz, doing side quests with bro <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZT8YuGgU1/>