

Internet Safety Series

Apps to Watch for

**Snapchat**

Defined Purpose: *"The most fun way to share the moment"*. Listed as appropriate for 12yrs +

How it works: Users can share photos and videos by sending them to a specific recipient, or by sharing them to their story. Stories are a collection of the previous 24 hours' pictures/videos and are potentially available to any user with a Snapchat account, depending on the configuration of the privacy settings.

Specific Concern: Because pictures and videos disappear immediately after viewing, sexting is a common use for the app. Although the photos disappear from the service, nothing prevents the receiver from taking a screen shot and continuing to use, share or sell the image for a variety of purposes including profiting, grooming and/or trafficking. This specific act is known as *sexploitation*. This app also contains a "map" feature that potentially allows other users to track the current location of the user, (depending on privacy setting configurations).

Kik

Defined Purpose: *"Kik is way more than messaging"*. Listed as appropriate for 17yrs +

How it works: Users can text over Wi-Fi without a phone number and share photos and videos to individuals, private/public groups, themed chats, etc. Communication exclusively over Wi-Fi creates a global community but also allows for an incredibly high level of anonymity. This app has no parental control options.

Specific Concern: This app has been publicly referred to by a convicted sexual predator as a, "Predator's Paradise"¹ and is known for its use in grooming and trafficking purposes. Law Enforcement has identified public groups on Kik involved in the active buying, sharing and trading of *Images of Child Sexual Exploitation*,² (formerly referred to as *Child Pornography*).

**Researcher, who was posing as a 15-year-old girl, was sent a lewd picture of an adult man within ten minutes of creating a profile.*

Similar Apps:

- WhatsApp
- Viber
- Facebook Messenger
- GroupMe

**Instagram**

Defined Purpose: *"A simple and fun way to capture and share the world's moments"*. Listed as appropriate for 12yrs +

How it works: Users can capture and edit photos and videos to share publicly or privately. *Hashtags* can be used to identify common interest groups, or to make the posted images searchable. The app also features a direct message capability as well as live streaming service.

Specific Concern: This app is similar to Snapchat in that, depending on how the privacy settings are configured, tagging users can identify people and locations. This may make it easier for traffickers/groomers to identify where users spend time in the physical world. Traffickers/groomers can also use hashtags to identify vulnerable populations and then connect using the private messaging feature.

Similar Apps:

- Facebook

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**Yubo**

Defined Purpose: “A social discovery app to make new friends”. Listed as appropriate for 17yrs +

How it works: Users can view profiles, swiping right for someone they are interested in meeting, or swiping left for someone they are not. Two users who swipe right on each other are then connected and can exchange, pictures, video and direct messages. There is also a live feature that allows users to enter live video chat rooms.

Specific Concern: Sometimes referred to as the “Teen Tinder”³ because app use emphasizes judging on appearance, Yubo is an app that has been used to identify, recruit, and groom potential victims. The live feature also allows for recording video, audio and text conversations, which could be used for sexploitation purposes.

**Researcher, who was posing as a 15 year old girl, was sent a request for lewd images by an adult man within 5 minutes of joining the app.*

Similar Apps:

- Tinder
- Bumble
- Hinge
- Grindr
- Tagged
- POF
- Coffee meets Bagel
- Badoo
- SKOUT
- MeetMe

Whisper

Defined Purpose: “An online community where millions of people around the world share real thoughts, trade advice and get the inside scoop”. Listed as appropriate for 17yrs +

How it works: Users can create images with text overlays and share with either the entire user base, specific curated groups. Users can also respond to posts through a private messaging feature in the app.

Specific Concern: The perceived anonymity of the user base entices vulnerable populations to share content that is explicit, as well as to share private information about themselves, their behaviors, perceptions, etc. This allows traffickers/groomers to exploit this information and gain trust and access to younger or more naive users. Whisper also includes a “Nearby” tab, which allows users to find other users close to their location, (which does not give the specific address, but does confirm distance to the user).

** Researcher, who was posing as a 15 year old girl, was sent a lewd message of a sexual nature by an adult man within 2 minutes of posting on this app.*

**TIKTOK**

Defined Purpose: “TikTok is not your ordinary destination for short-form mobile video. It’s raw, real and without boundaries”. Listed as appropriate for 12yrs +

How it works: Users are encouraged to create, edit and share 15 second videos privately and publicly. Users can sync videos to their favorite music, use filters and speed up, slow down or pause their recordings.

Specific Concern: The algorithm that TikTok uses is complicated, but the easiest explanation is that clicking on a specific hashtag can identify other users using the same hashtag. This makes it easier for traffickers/groomers to identify vulnerable populations and use the instant messaging feature to make introductions and gain access.

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**ChatLive**

Defined Purpose: *"Meet and make new friends online"*. Listed as appropriate for 17yrs +

How it works: The app is designed to randomly generate and curate conversations between users. Users create an account and can identify their interests by gender and if they would like the app to initiate matches via text or video. There is a paid and a free version which allow different tiers of access, although if one user has a higher tier and matches with someone who has a lower tier, both parties can access paid features.

Specific Concern: Traffickers/Groomers depend on the anonymous nature of the app for vulnerable populations to share more than they should and use that information to recruit, groom and traffic. In addition, since both users do not need a paid tier to access all features, traffickers/groomers often share sexually explicit material with minors and other vulnerable populations

**Researcher, who was posing as a 15-year-old girl, was exposed to live video content in which sex acts were being performed by an adult man within 2 minutes of joining the app.*

Secret Calculator - Photo Album

Defined Purpose: *"Award winning calculator app for iPad and iPhone"*. Listed as appropriate for 17yrs +

How it works: This app interface looks and functions as a calculator. A user generated code followed by the % sign unlocks a hidden vault feature where videos, photos and other media can be privately stored.

Specific Concern: Traffickers/Groomers suggest this app in their recruiting process to store lewd or incriminating photos and videos that they send and/or request from their targets.

Similar Apps:

- Fake Calculator
- Secret Photo Vault

1 CBS News. "Kik Statement to '48 Hours.'" CBS News, CBS Interactive, 4 June 2017, www.cbsnews.com/news/kik-app-statement-to-48-hours-may-2017/.

2 Fox-Brewster, Thomas. "This \$1 Billion App Can't 'Kik' Its Huge Child Exploitation Problem." Forbes, Forbes Magazine, 3 Aug. 2017, www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2017/08/03/kik-has-a-massive-child-abuse-problem/#2eeef8eb1a14.

3 O'Brien, Carl. "Teens Using Yubo May Be at Risk - Study." The Irish Times, The Irish Times, 11 Jan. 2019, www.irishtimes.com/news/education/teens-using-yubo-may-be-at-risk-study-1.3754117.

SHARED HOPE INTERNATIONAL DISCLAIMER:

This research was conducted by Shared Hope staff in a controlled setting, with the knowledge of local law enforcement. Any suspected illegal activity was reported to appropriate channels.