

## INFLUENCERS &amp; CREATORS

## She Got Harassed by TikTok Trolls—Then Her Brand Deals Suffered

Creators face account suspensions when aggressors use algorithms against them



Users can wage flagging as a culture war weapon instead of a tool to remove legitimately harmful content. Photo Illustration: Trent Joaquin



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Last year, activist and influencer Angelina Moles spoke out about the “fat face” TikTok filter.

“What it would do is give you a double chin and big cheeks. Basically, your face would look like mine,” said Moles, who is a self-proclaimed fat activist. “It was just making a mockery out of fat people.”

Moles, who uses the pronouns she/her and they/them interchangeably, made a TikTok video designating the filter fatphobic. A few days later, thousands of TikTok notifications rolled in. Trolls began commenting on her account en masse. She received death threats.

After enough trolls reported Moles' video, TikTok disabled their account. They hadn't violated any of its terms of service, they said. As a result, Moles couldn't deliver two brand partnership deals worth approximately \$750 on time.

Eventually, TikTok reinstated Moles' account, but the experience highlighted one thing—Moles' income could suffer as a result of her activism.



The tension between creators and content moderation policies is particularly relevant right now, with Elon Musk recently announcing plans to take Twitter private, partially on the grounds of free speech. While Twitter's ban of Donald Trump is often the prime talking point on platform overreach, small-time creators are often the victims of tech companies' uneven enforcement of moderation policies, as well as trolls who abuse the system. As a result, influencers risk losing their livelihoods if they can't complete brand deals, or their pool of potential clients dries up.

## Running afoul of platforms

As Moles found, people can use content flagging as a culture-war weapon instead of a tool to remove legitimately harmful content. It's up to platforms' content moderation tools to sort bona fide from bogus complaints. Creators like Drew Afualo find these systems patchy.

Afualo has amassed 6.9 million TikTok followers by calling out sexism in other popular TikToks, often made by men, using the platform's "stitching" feature. She has blasted men for justifying sexual coercion and shaming women's bodies—among other topics—and her account is often flagged by the followers of the original poster who disagree with her takes.

Afualo has lost her account four times as a result, after hitting 400,000 followers, 900,000 followers, 1 million followers and 1.5 million.





TikTok, like other platforms, lets users appeal video and account takedowns.



"There have been times, especially when I was getting banned all the time, where I felt like I couldn't do it," Afualo said. "If I do, my video is gonna do well and then I'm gonna have to deal with a bunch of dudes who are like, 'I hate you, fat bitch.'"



As Afualo's following grows, the risk of suspension has decreased and brands have generally been supportive.



Of course, part of platforms' moderation struggles stem from thorny questions about the limits of free speech. The controversy that a creator generates can be meaningful in and of itself, said Sarah Ivey, chief strategy officer, North America at Havas Media Group.



"When you find a creator's point of view so compelling that [people are] either canceling or supporting them, you know you've hit on something real," Ivey said. "It's an interesting point in time to look at your audience."



## Powerless influencers and brands

Despite the experiences of Moles and Afualo, TikTok claims that "mass reporting content or accounts does not lead to an automatic removal or to a greater likelihood of removal by our Safety team," according to a blog post. When asked for comment, TikTok referred to publicly available materials.

TikTok has also said publicly it has gotten better over time at detecting "false positives," or instances where the platform incorrectly removes videos, citing data that fewer videos were reinstated after being appealed in the fourth quarter than the prior one.

TikTok is not the only platform where creators can feel the sting of uneven content moderation policies. Moles also faced censorship on

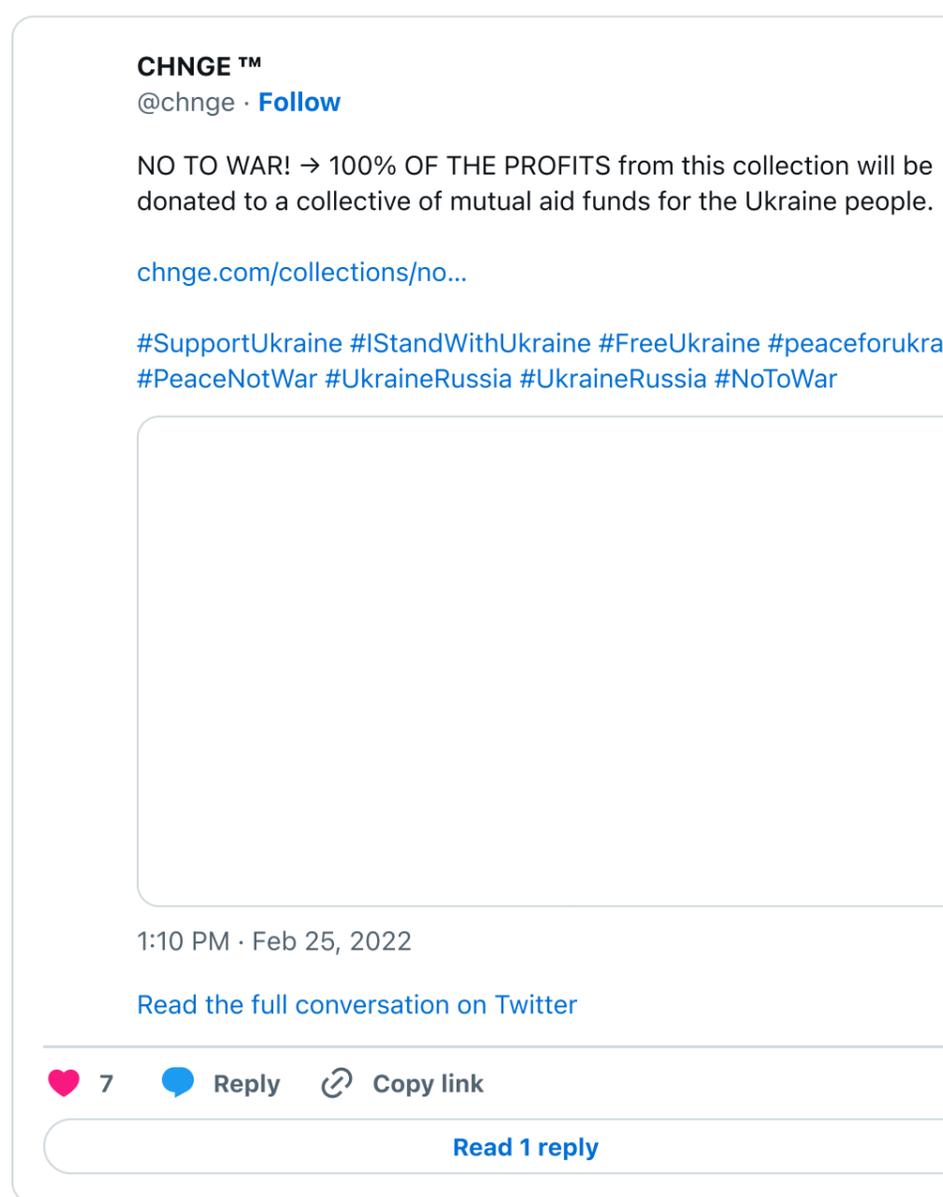
suit, there's more skin on me to be shown, and that gets flagged as nudity and then gets removed entirely," she said.

Instagram, whose parent Meta Platforms did not respond to Adweek's request for comment, **allows** users whose content is taken down for policy violations to request a review.

## Contractual clauses or contacting reps

Sustainable fashion brand CHNGE partnered with Afualo on a campaign, but when the algorithm took down her TikTok account, Afualo couldn't execute the CHNGE campaign.

The brand couldn't contact the platform, said Tanner Sweitzer, CMO at CHNGE. The brand empathized with Afualo and worked with her once her account was active again.



These incidents, where brands need to contact platform reps, happen all the time, said Sweitzer, adding that it's just luck of the draw as to whether the individual can actually assist.

Not every brand is as understanding, though. When her account was down, Moles couldn't create content for a campaign within the agreed upon time period and has since been stonewalled by the brand.

Other brands write the possibility of content takedowns into the contracts. Sixtine Rouyre, an influencer and model, said that one brand recently reached out to do another deal with her and told her, "we do know it tends to get taken down. In our contract we want a 'if this happens, then we do \_\_\_\_.'" As an alternative to a contractual clause, Rouyre said she would offer to post content on another platform like Instagram reels, which in her experience are less likely to be censored.

Less understanding brands, according to Sweitzer, will just "abandon the campaign" and request reimbursement.



For platforms, it smacks of hypocrisy. They “cannot in one sentence, say ‘we are hiring this many [diverse] people and we’re really standing for injustice,’” said Moles, “and then at the same time, be disabling or deleting or blocking your Black creators, your fat creators, your disabled creators, your queer creators, et cetera, from being seen on the major pages.”



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