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March 7, 2022

Ted Livingston  
CEO and Founder  
Kik  
1237 7th Street  
Santa Monica, CA 90401

### **Re: Kik on 2022 Dirty Dozen List**

Dear Mr. Livingston,

We are writing to inform you that the National Center on Sexual Exploitation—a non-partisan nonprofit in Washington, DC dedicated to addressing the full spectrum of sexual exploitation—is placing Kik on the 2022 Dirty Dozen List, a campaign that names 12 mainstream contributors to sexual exploitation and abuse.

We are deeply concerned with the exploitative behavior and sexually explicit content facilitated via Kik's platform—in particular Kik public and private groups being used to view and distribute child sexual abuse materials and hardcore pornography. Additionally, we are concerned with the rampant number of adults grooming minors for sexual abuse online and Kik's lack of robust safety features which allows such abuse to thrive. In fact, Kik has been called by a convicted child sex abuser a "predator's paradise."<sup>i</sup>

Given Kik's well-known popularity with a young age demographic – figures show 70% of Kik users are between the ages of 13-24 years old – your company has a serious social responsibility to address these problems and to make your platform a safe environment.<sup>ii</sup> And in today's culture, where sexual harassment and assault are rampant and kids are spending more time online than ever, corporations such as Kik have a renewed corporate responsibility to refrain from normalizing material and behavior that promotes sexual exploitation, especially the millions of children who use Kik every day.

While we acknowledge that Kik has policies on paper that ban pornography and other inappropriate content, NCOSE researchers found public and private chat groups rife with sexually explicit material that are accessible in only a few clicks. Clearly Kik is not doing enough to ensure your policies are being enforced, instead relying on user reports to catch bad behavior, which is especially

concerning when looking at cases of adult predators grooming young children. Does Kik reasonably expect vulnerable minors to not only protect themselves on their own, but also police the platform?

This lack of action on Kik's part has caused serious harm to countless victims. Kik's current safety features are worryingly slack, only providing a block and report system and failing to warn young users of the dangers they may face on Kik. Unlike some other social media and chat systems, Kik provides no way to filter or block certain content automatically, does not allow users to customize their direct message settings on a site-wide level, has a lax automatic moderation system, and does not feature any parental controls. This is an egregious betrayal of parents' trust, who reasonably expect that safety settings will reliably protect their children.

We believe that not only can Kik take steps to effectively combat these issues, but your company could stand to become an industry leader in child safety policy and content moderation to ensure Kik remains an open, safe, and exploitation-free community appropriate for all ages. The National Center on Sexual Exploitation encourages Kik to make the following improvements:

1. **Develop and implement robust safety features** such as filters, parental controls, and moderation strategies that actively catch and block predatory behavior and inappropriate content from remaining on the platform.
2. **Be transparent** about the problems happening on Kik – many platforms provide regular transparency reports detailing the potential risks a user might face while using the service. The description you provide in the app store should note the common dangers.
3. **Provide meaningful education to all users and parents** on the potential harms and risks associated with exploitation and abuse on Kik, and prominently feature and highlight reporting processes on all forms of Kik's interface.

### **Grooming and Predatory Behavior on Kik**

Kik has a severe, years-long problem with predatory adults using the platform to contact, groom, and abuse the many minors who use Kik. These bad actors know Kik lacks the moderation or safety tools to catch them, and the lack of identity and age verification allow these predators to remain completely anonymous. This has resulted in pain, exploitation, and lasting trauma for the many victims who were abused through your platform.

Grooming is more than adults simply talking online with children. Research shows just how dangerous this open contact from predators to vulnerable minors really is—one study found that predators who actually made contact with child victims are more likely to use the Internet to locate potential sexual abuse victims and engage in grooming behavior.<sup>iii</sup> It can take only a mere 8 minutes for a predator to form a bond with a child, making a chat app like Kik the perfect place to cultivate abusive relationships online.<sup>iv</sup> Groomers use a variety of tactics to gain the victim's trust, including using pornography as a tool to manipulate the child into believing the sexual abuse is normal.

One study noted:

Indeed, part of the grooming process is the normalization of sexual activity with children and breaking down inhibitions. Offenders use child pornography to teach children how to masturbate, perform oral sex and engage in sexual intercourse. Sometimes, blackmail is also involved, usually at the later stage, after the child has been exposed to some sort of pornography, or after the child has

performed sexual favors. The saturation of the Internet with such material may serve to ‘normalize’ this behavior and probably makes it easier to objectify children as sexual artifacts.<sup>v</sup>

We know your company has been made aware of just how bad predatory behavior on Kik really is, given the multitude of news articles that have been published over the years. In fact, Forbes published a blistering piece that detailed the child sexual abuse problem on Kik in 2017:

A joint *Forbes* and *Point Report* investigation has uncovered evidence of a vast number of child exploitation cases involving the use of Kik, where some of the most appalling material is being shared and young girls and boys are being targeted for grooming. Posing as 14-year-old girls, we also discovered just how quickly predators were on the prowl and how third-party apps for sharing profiles appeared to be facilitating access to minors.<sup>vi</sup>

However, five years later Kik has failed to make any significant changes or improvements that truly stem this problem. Thorn, a leading organization combating online child exploitation, published a study earlier this year that revealed minors aged 9-17 on Kik were experiencing some of the highest rates of online sexual interactions with other users – **23% of surveyed children who use Kik have had a sexual encounter.**<sup>vii</sup> Even more concerning is the disproportionately high rate of instances the young survey participants had a sexual interaction **involving someone they believed to be an adult: 14%.**<sup>viii</sup>

Bark, the number one app for monitoring children’s online activities that, provides critical insight into the state of child online safety today, also released a report in 2021 that details just how bad predatory and other bad behavior is on Kik. Here are some fast facts from the report, which analyzed over 3.4 billion messages across text, email, and 30+ apps and social media platforms, that highlight the problem in particular:<sup>ix</sup>

- **68.97%** of tweens (aged 9-12) and **90.73%** of teens (aged 13-17) **encountered nudity or content of a sexual nature.**
- **9.95%** of tweens (aged 9-12) and **20.54%** of teens (aged 13-17) **encountered predatory behaviors from someone online.**
- Kik was listed by Bark as the #1 app flagged for severe sexual content, #4 for severe bullying, #1 for hate speech, and #5 for extreme violence.

## Severe Sexual Content

### Top 5 Social Apps/Platforms Flagged

 1. Kik

 2. Tumblr

 3. Houseparty

 4. Discord

While we could fill this entire letter with examples of Kik being used to facilitate grooming and abuse, here are a few more recent examples in the news:

- A former elementary school principal was arrested in 2020 after using a private Kik group called “Loving Kids” to try and meet up with a mother and her 4-year old daughter for a sexual encounter.<sup>x</sup>
- In a particularly egregious 2022 case, an undercover FBI employee began interacting with a child predator on the social media application Kik. In the chats, the predator made statements that he had sexually abused children, and that he had trafficked a child to engage in commercial sex acts. He also said that he had recently traveled out of state to have sex with another 12-year-old girl.<sup>xi</sup>
- A man was arrested in February 2022 for uploading CSAM through Kik.<sup>xii</sup>
- In January 2022, another man was sentenced to 35 years in prison for several severe child sexual abuse crimes facilitated through Kik.<sup>xiii</sup>
- Over 4,000 images and videos depicting sexual victimization of pre-pubescent girls, including toddlers, engaged in sexual acts with adults were found after a man distributed them through Kik.<sup>xiv</sup>
- A man actively solicited and distributed child sexual exploitation material through participation in several group chats on Kik, some of which he was a group administrator.<sup>xv</sup>
- A Kik group called “Abduction and R@pe 3” hosted users who described various fantasies, requested the sexual assault of others (with either a knowing or unknowing victim), and traded rape/sexual assault videos.<sup>xvi</sup>

The potential role Kik is playing in the facilitation of child abuse and sex trafficking cannot be understated. Clearly Kik can be counted among the technological advances propelling predators’ access to minors, a fact that exploiters know and take advantage of every day.

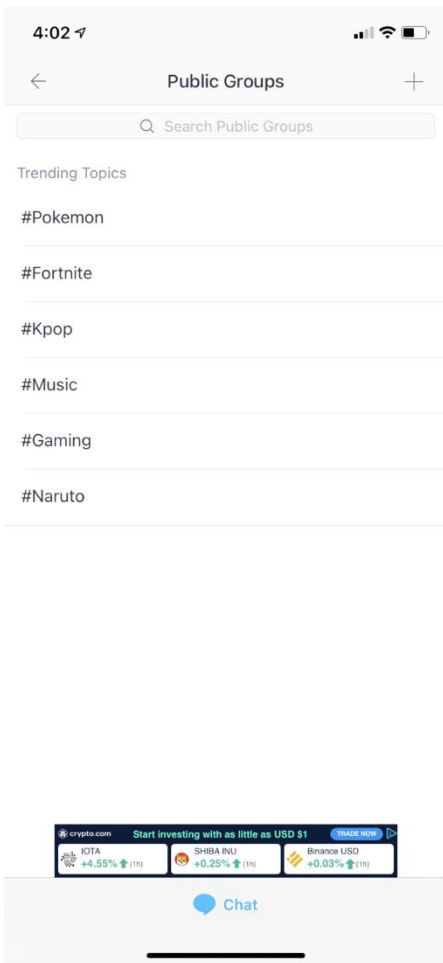
### **Pornography and Sexually Explicit Material on Kik**

Kik’s policies do not allow pornography or inappropriate content to be posted anywhere on the platform. Kik even goes as far to say in their Community Guidelines: “By “inappropriate content” we mean any photo, video, or written depiction of pornography, nudity, real or implied sexual acts, graphic or gratuitous violence, and anything else that doesn’t belong in a positive chat community with an audience age 13 and up.”

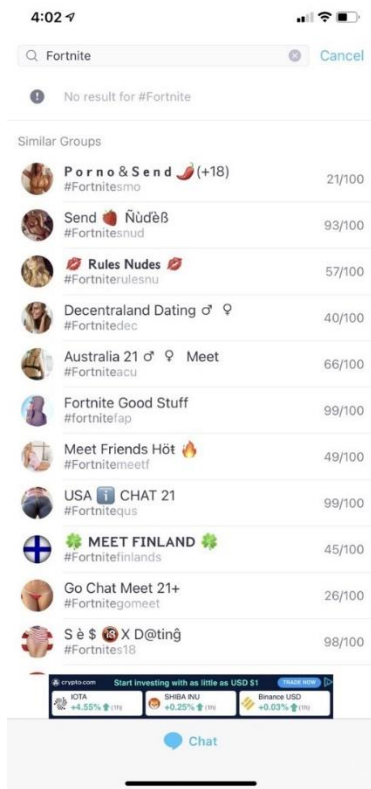
**However, Kik’s policies that ban pornography and other inappropriate content are not being enforced in any meaningful way – in fact they are thriving within your app.**

NCOSE researchers downloaded and set up two Kik accounts as 13 year old girls in February 2022. Using only the suggested search terms to look up common interests such as #Fortnite, #Pokemon, #Roblox, or even the innocuous #Fun tag resulted in chatrooms dedicated to pornography, trading sexually explicit images/nudes, and other content that clearly isn’t allowed on Kik.

The auto-search “trending topics” suggested by Kik:



Here's what came up when we searched #Fortnite:



Other innocent tags such as #Middle, #Fun, and #Pretty brought up similar results:

16:09


Search


middle


Cancel


#middle  
#middle 1/50


Similar Groups


 Middle Tennessee males only  
#middletennesseegay 48/50


 Middletown \$ext With \$luts [25+]  
#Middletown.up25 40/50


 New York Drugs/420 Online Store  
#Middletown420connect 36/100


 Middletown Delaware chat  
#middletownDE 41/50


 MiddleTennFunSwing  
#MiddleTennFunSwing 95/100

 Middletown 30+ For  
#Middletowngirl 48/50

 Middlesbrough \$ex  
#Middlesbroughchat 45/100

 Confess Share 35+  
#middleagedandhappy 32/100


 Glocks/Sig Sauers/Revolvers/Draco A...  
#middletownguns 33/50


 Middletown MASSAGE'S ROOM  
#middletownnj 57/100


3:00


fun


Cancel


 FUN CHAT (ACTIVES NEEDED)  
#funchat\_5 41/100


 FUN TIME FOR FUN PEOPLE 25+  
#funfunfun2021 36/100


 Bored of covid  
#funboredfriends 25/100


 Almost Anything Goes  
#funnyspiffs 48/100


 Playfully fun  
#funplayfu.N 40/100


 Tease Us Tuesday Fun Chat  
#funchatandstuff 16/100


 40+ invite  
#Funny40 49/100


 Fun and friends 18+ ( no sellers )  
#funandfriends2021 41/100


 \$5/HouseOfNueds  
#funandnued 14/100

 NaughtyOnly 21+  
#funplaytimes 23/100

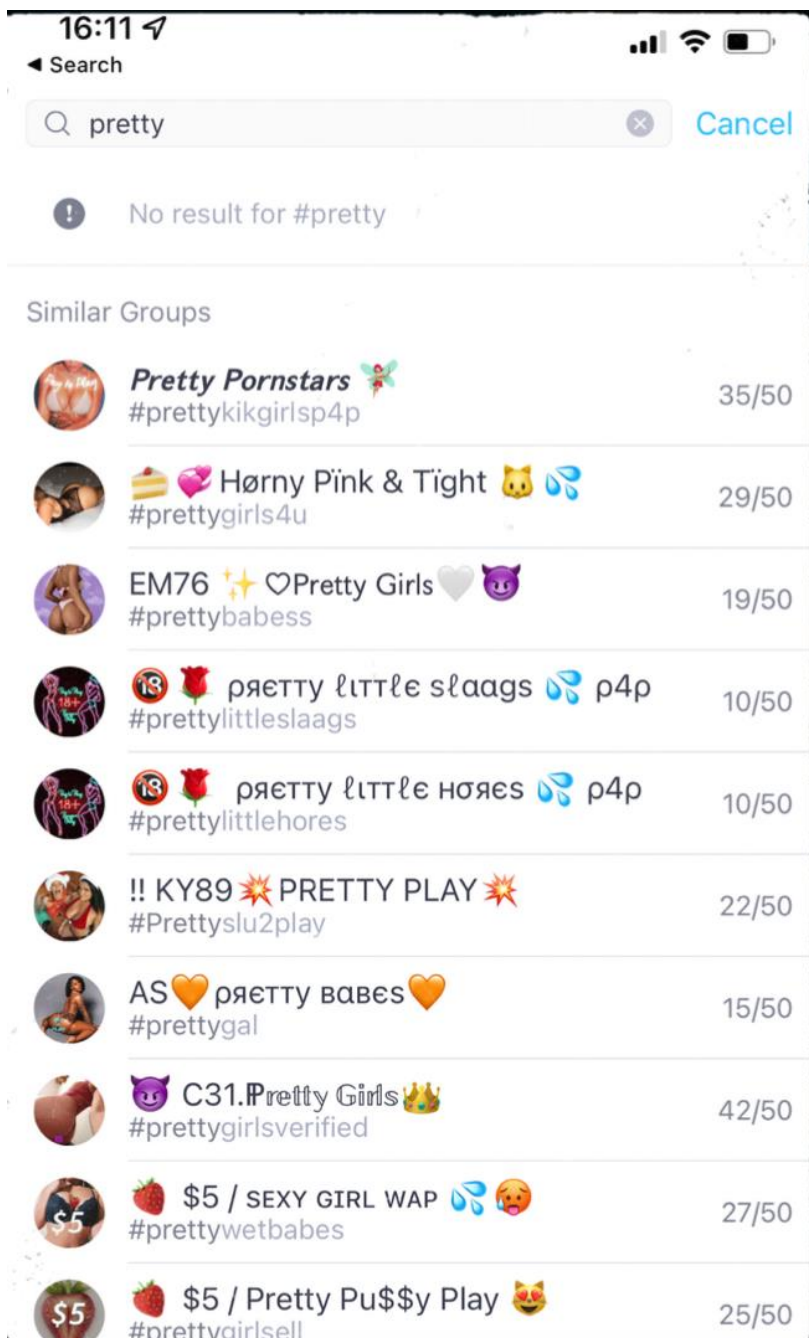
 Have fun (18+) no rules  
#funny\_wtf 52/100

 Big Shlongs & Tatas!  
#funtimes911 19/100

 Gay Fun chat  
#funtr 56/100

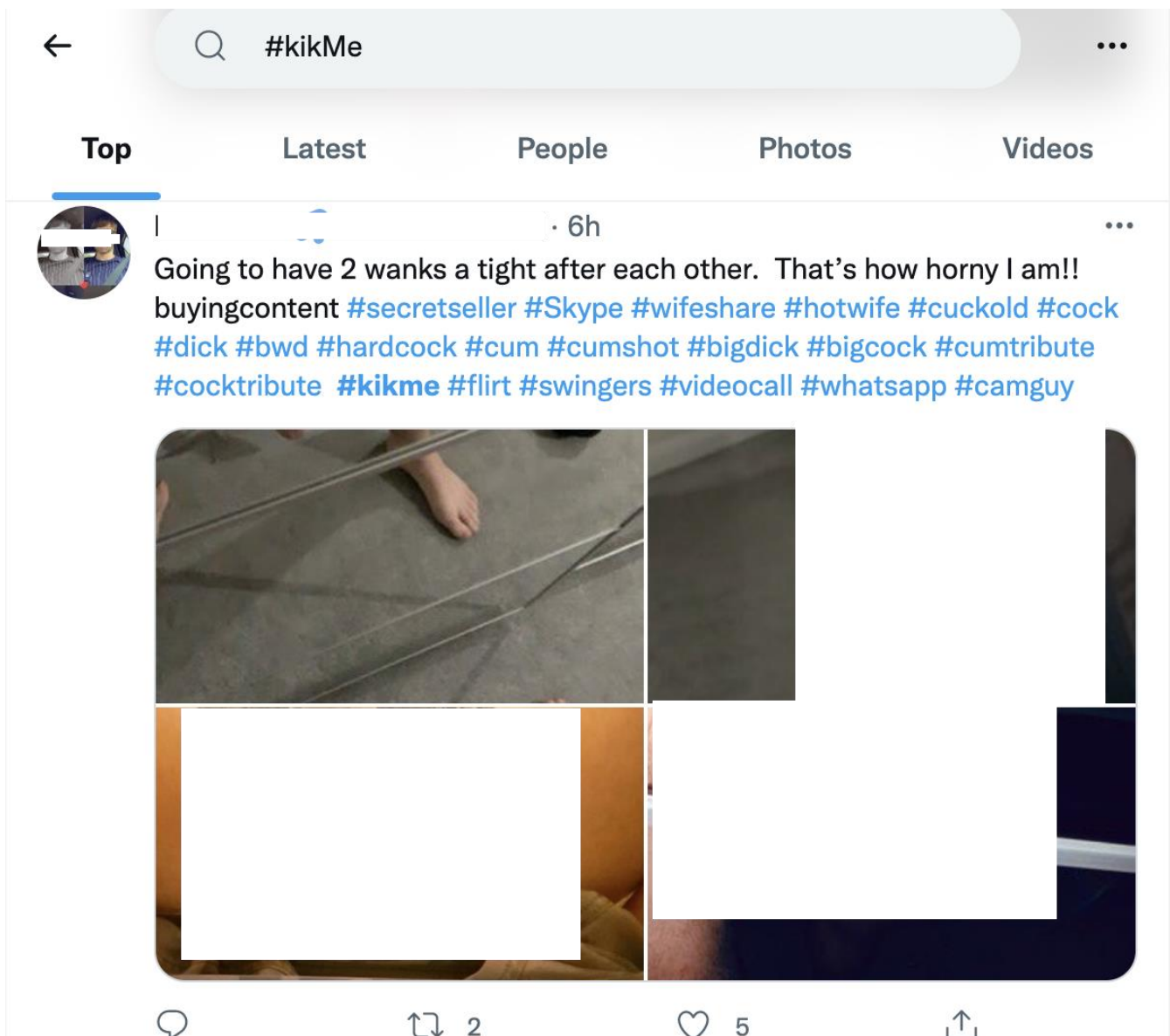


Chat

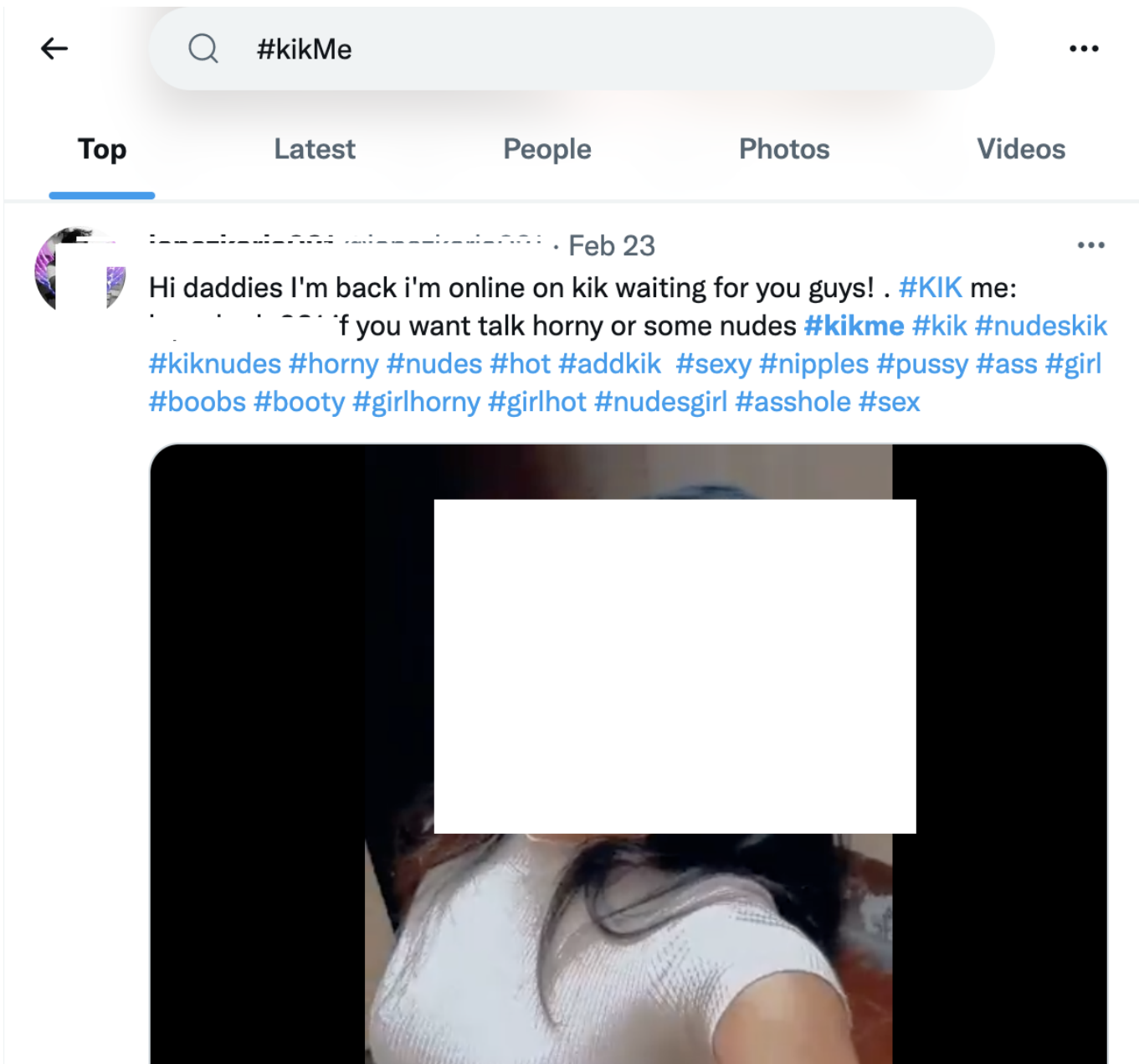


**It's critical to point out that the above screenshots only include a fraction of the content on Kik, because the majority of chatting on Kik takes place in private groups.**

On apps outside of Kik, it's a well-known fact just how easy and accessible sexual content is throughout the platform. People looking to remain anonymous while trading pornography, promoting or selling commercial sex acts, or participate in other sexual behavior flock to the app in droves. The popular hashtag #KikMe is absolutely filled with pornography and inappropriate content on external platforms like Twitter, driving more traffic to Kik that is explicitly against their written policies.



The above screenshot, when uncensored, depicted male genitalia.



Especially given our society's struggle to cope with the impacts of multiple forms of sexual abuse and violence and the popularity of your platform with minors, Kik's choice to not enforce your own policies and allow pornography on the app is a dangerous one. Child sexual abuse, adult sexual exploitation,<sup>xvii</sup> racially-motivated sexual violence,<sup>xviii</sup> sexual assault on college and university campuses,<sup>xix</sup> sexual trafficking of women and children,<sup>xx</sup> and incest<sup>xxi</sup>—these problems have not emerged from a vacuum, but flourish within the context of unprecedented access to hardcore pornographic material. Adult, hardcore pornography—with its raw, brutal, debasing, violent and hate-filled themes—exacerbates the deeply entrenched social ills mentioned above and unleashes devastating impacts at the individual and societal level.

**Why does Kik continue to allow this content on their platform? Especially given the millions of children who currently use your app?**

This problem is clearly beyond any individual parent, school, or person to take on. Protecting kids online and ensuring abuse and exploitation are not taking place requires accountability and effort from every facet of society—including corporations like Kik.

When combined with the overwhelming evidence of grooming and escalation to child sexual abuse, the presence of pornography and inappropriate content has no place on Kik, especially given this content is explicitly banned in Kik's policies. The platform must do more to prevent this material from not only thriving throughout Kik, but actively being suggested to users only 13 years old.

Kik's lack of care in designing a platform that protects its majority userbase is egregious given the countless stories of grooming and clear evidence of pornography happening throughout the platform. And Kik's emphasis on privacy and data protection make it even more difficult for law enforcement to step in when needed, despite their claims otherwise.

We hope that facts like these will cause you as much concern as they do us. As the creators and guardians of Kik, you are responsible for its culture. You are responsible for setting the tone of its online environment, for regulating that environment, and doing your utmost to ensure that it is not a forum for wide-scale sexually explicit content or a hunting ground for predators to roam. In this regard, we strongly believe you are falling short of doing all that could be done to mitigate against the use of your platform in ways that foster and perpetuate sexual harms.

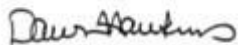
The world is waking up to the collective responsibility we all have in ensuring a world truly free from the harms of all forms of sexual abuse and exploitation, including corporations. Many companies and platforms are working to eliminate policies that have enabled sexual exploitation in their business practices, and increased attention is now on tech companies in particular to step up and choose to place people over profits. This is Kik's invitation to do likewise, and in so doing to assume a leadership position within the social media sector.

We hope Kik will rise to this challenge and meet with us to discuss ways by which it can become a corporate leader in the fight for a world free from sexual exploitation. Please contact us at [public@ncose.com](mailto:public@ncose.com) or at 202.393.7245.

Respectfully,



Patrick Trueman, Esq.  
President



Dawn Hawkins  
CEO