

What TikTok does to your mental health: ‘It’s embarrassing we know so little’

Nearly six in 10 teenagers count themselves as daily users of the app yet little is known about the impacts on the brain

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In the few years since its launch, **TikTok** has already altered the face of the social media landscape, attracting more than 1 billion users and leading competitors to replicate some of its most unique features.

The impact of that explosive growth and the ‘TikTok-ification’ of the internet at large on social media users remains little understood, experts warn, exacerbating concerns about the impact of social media on our habits and mental health.

“It’s embarrassing that we know so little about TikTok and its effects,” said Philipp Lorenz-Spreen, a research scientist at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin. “Research often lags behind industry, and this is an example of an instance where that could become a big problem.”

The lack of understanding in how TikTok affects its users is particularly concerning given the app’s massive popularity among young people, experts say. Increasingly **called** “the TikTok generation”, Gen Z prefers the platform to other social media, with **nearly six in 10 teenagers** counting themselves as daily users. The majority of US teens have accounts on TikTok, with 67% saying they have ever used the app and 16% saying they use it “almost constantly”.

“We owe it to ourselves and to the users of these platforms to understand how we are changed by the screens we use and how we use them,” said Michael Rich, a pediatrician who studies the impact of technology on children at Boston Children’s hospital.

“We need more information to make informed decisions on how we’re going to help younger people understand how to use them thoughtfully and mindfully – or not use them at all.”

What makes TikTok different

Concerns about the mental health impacts of social media activity are longstanding, and have only intensified in recent years. In 2021, for example, [internal research](#) at Instagram made public by Frances Haugen showed the drastic mental health impacts of the photo app on teen users – including increased rates of eating disorders among teen girls – and sparked widespread calls for stronger regulation.

But TikTok [hosts similar harmful content](#), and experts warn a host of innovative features of the platform raise unique concerns.

TikTok largely optimizes content for minutes and hours of view time, [internal documents](#) leaked in 2021 showed, rather than prioritizing metrics like clicks and engagement favored by most social media platforms before. In order to do that, the company has deployed a unique algorithm and a landing page that marks the most extreme departure yet from a chronological to an algorithmic feed.

“What that does to the brain, we don’t know,” said Lorenz-Spreen.

Studies show that when chronological feeds are discarded in favor of suggested content, the algorithm frequently gives rise to more extreme views. One report in 2021 showed more than [70% of extremist content](#) found on YouTube was recommended to users by the algorithm. And it incentivizes users to share attention-grabbing content that gets picked up by the feed.

In recent years, TikTok has faced intense scrutiny for dangerous challenges the algorithm has given rise to. The “Benadryl challenge”, wherein participants took a large amount of antihistamines in an attempt to produce hallucinogenic effects, led to at least [one death](#). A new lawsuit claims the “blackout challenge” [led to deaths](#) of several young girls.

“Compared to other social media sites, TikTok is uniquely performative,” said Rich, the pediatrician. “This leads to both interesting content, and some edgy ways of seeking attention that are less healthy.”

TikTok also appears to be “faster than any other platform at detecting interest”, said Marc Faddoul, co-director of Tracking Exposed, a digital rights organization investigating TikTok’s algorithm. The app’s For You Page seems to know its users’ desires and interests so well it has sparked memes and articles such as [The TikTok Algorithm Knew My Sexuality Better Than I Did](#) and [‘Why is My TikTok For You Page All Lesbians?’ Asks Woman Who is About to Realize Why](#).

Researchers are still parsing what that uncanny tailoring means for users, particularly as it relates to targeted content around mental illness and other sensitive issues.

“The app provides an endless stream of emotional nudges, which can be hard to recognize and really impact users in the long run,” Faddoul said. “It’s not going to make anyone depressed overnight, but hours of consumption every day can have a serious impact on your mental health.”

These concerns are particularly pronounced in the realm of ADHD content, where users have [reported being diagnosed](#) by medical professionals after seeing videos about their symptoms. But while the prevalence of the #ADHD hashtag has brought increased awareness of the condition experts have warned of unintended negative effects, including

medical misinformation, especially as the platform accepts advertising money from a number of for-profit mental health startups such as Cerebral.

TikTok declined to comment on criticisms relating to health misinformation and users self-diagnosing based on content seen on the app. It also declined to comment on its partnership with mental health startup Cerebral or its policies on medical information used in advertisements.