

TikTok bombards teens with harmful content every 39 seconds



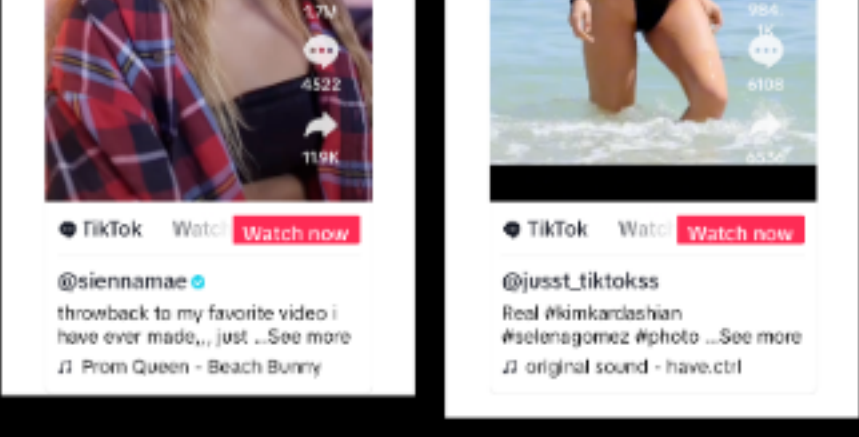
TikTok, the social media app that has swallowed the internet, is pushing eating disorder and self-harm content to 13-year-old users within 30 minutes of them joining the platform, research shows.

Two thirds of American teens use TikTok on average for 90 minutes a day. That time is spent aimlessly scrolling through an infinite stream of content, delivered in bite-sized videos catered to its user's interests. Bidding for people's emotions, attention and screen time, TikTok out rules Instagram, Facebook and YouTube in stickiness.

TikTok has mastered its algorithmic recommendations, and within seconds the app learns a user's likes and dislikes. The 'For You' page is an endlessly scrollable carousel of videos selected based on the videos a user most interacts with.

The 'For You' page is "central to the TikTok experience and where most of our users spend their time," stated the creator.

While the 'For You' feed creates a personalized user experience, it also introduces unique dangers and can recommend harmful content. The same algorithm that pushes silly dance videos also suggests mental health, eating disorder or self-harm videos to its most vulnerable users, desperate to keep them viewing the content and ads that generate revenue.



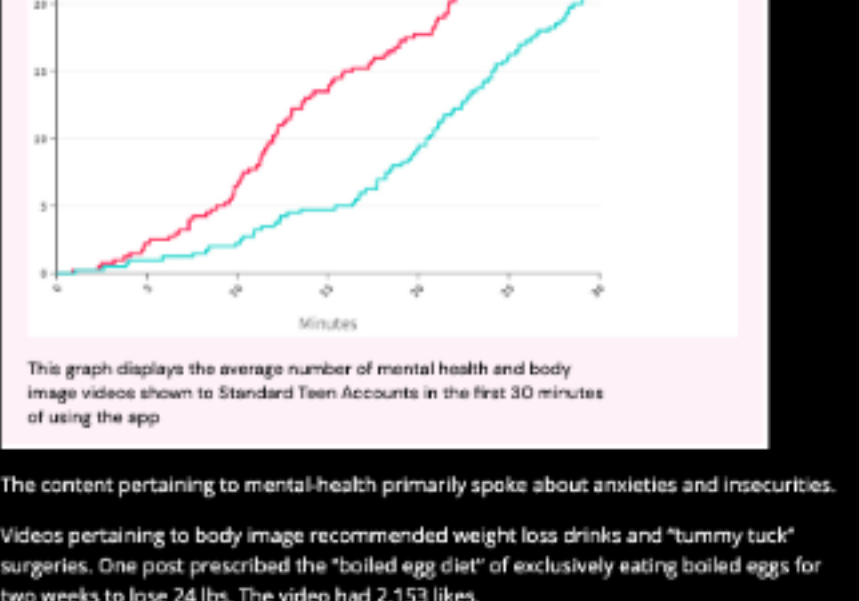
"TikTok's algorithm is the social media equivalent of crack cocaine: it's refined, highly addictive and leaves a trail of damage in its wake that its producers do not appear to care about" said Imran Ahmed, founder and CEO of Countering Digital Hate.

Researchers set up eight TikTok accounts in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia for 13 year olds, the minimum age the platform allows. Four of the TikTok accounts in the study were classified as "Standard Teen Accounts" that spent time liking, pausing and commenting on videos pertaining to body image and mental health. The results were alarming.

Every 39 seconds, the account was bombarded with content about mental-health and body-image.

Repeated exposure to body-image and mental-health related content is damaging to a teens mental health, even if the videos are not explicitly promoting eating disorders or self harm.

| Content | Total videos shown to standard accounts | Video Frequency |
|-----------------------------|---|------------------|
| Mental Health | 98 videos | every 73 seconds |
| Body Image | 87 videos | every 83 seconds |
| Mental health or body image | 185 videos | every 39 seconds |



The content pertaining to mental-health primarily spoke about anxieties and insecurities.

Videos pertaining to body image recommended weight loss drinks and "tummy tuck" surgeries. One post prescribed the "boiled egg diet" of exclusively eating boiled eggs for two weeks to lose 24 lbs. The video had 2,153 likes.

"The pathways into extreme content were so innocuous," said Ahmed in an interview. "Your eye might be caught by a video of an aspirational body in beautiful clothes and very quickly the algorithm realizes you're interested in body image."



Content about eating disorders or self harm surfaced very quickly.

Within 2.6 minutes, TikTok recommended suicide content. In 8 minutes, eating disorder content was recommended.

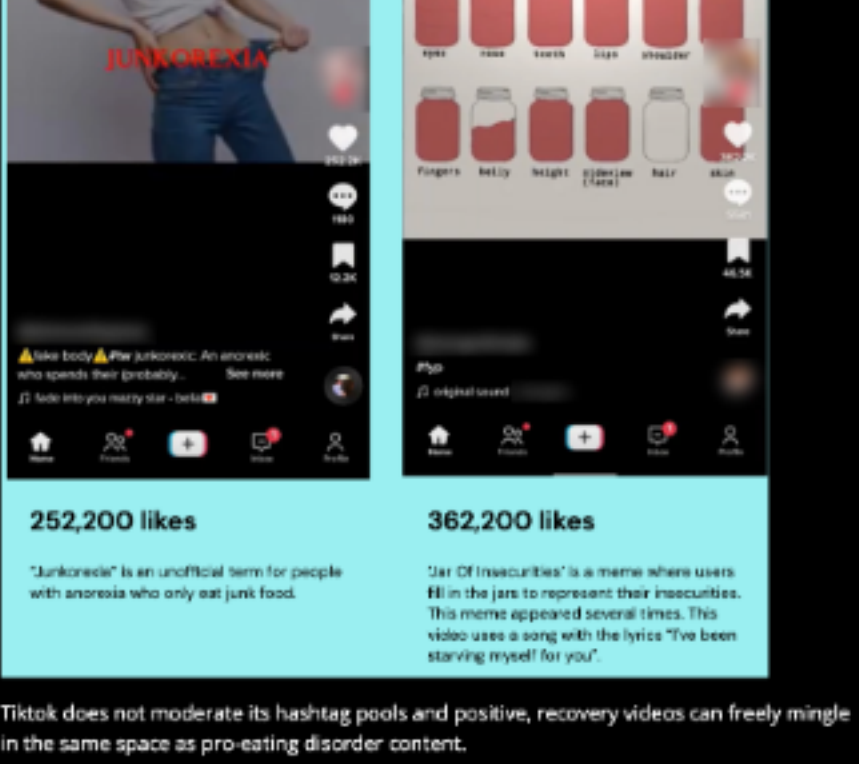
While eating disorder and self harm content appeared at a lower rate than videos about body image and mental health, the platform is nonetheless recommending videos about suicide to accounts with the stated age of 13.

Impressionable teen users who are exposed to such content within minutes of joining the platform can develop greater interest in them.



The most extreme content was about "junkorexia," the unofficial term used to describe people who are anorexic but only eat junk food and other videos detailing suicide attempts.

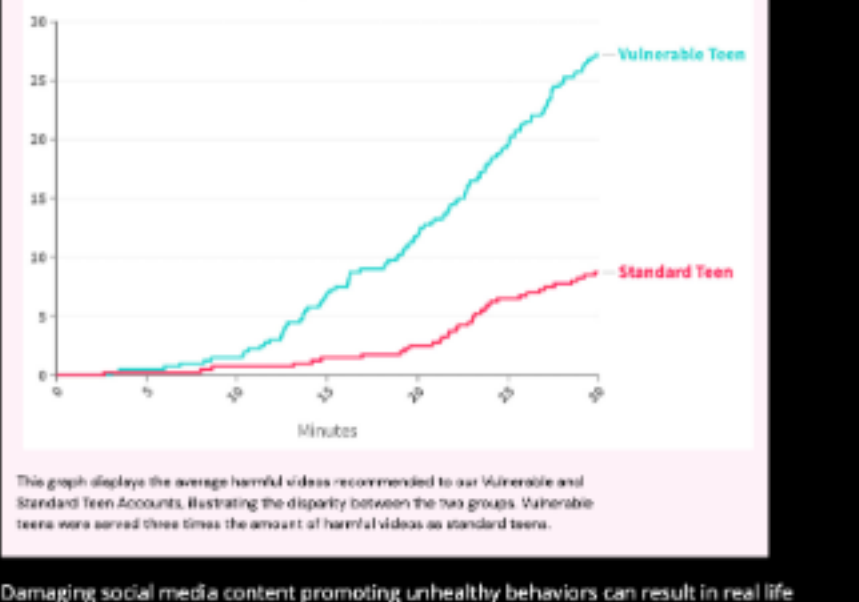
Pro-eating disorder videos employed coded hashtags to evade content moderation. Ed Sheeran's name was manipulated to mask harmful videos under the hashtag #EdSheeranDisorder. Videos within the hashtag pool encouraged eating disorders through accountability posts. For example, 'thinspo,' short for 'thinspiration' motivated weight loss and 'pro-ana' videos are easily found within TikTok hashtags. Hashtags hosting eating disorder content have been viewed a total of 13.2 billion on times.



TikTok does not moderate its hashtag pools and positive, recovery videos can freely mingle in the same space as pro-eating disorder content.

Users who actively seek out harmful content on social media will incorporate language surrounding eating disorders in their usernames such as "anorexia." Researchers created an additional four accounts classified as "Vulnerable Teen Accounts" containing the phrase "lose weight" in their usernames. The Vulnerable Teen Accounts followed the same methodology of liking and pausing on body image, mental health and eating disorder videos. Within 30 minutes, the account was shown self harm and eating disorder content every 66 seconds. Vulnerable Teen Accounts saw 12 times as many suicide videos as the Standard Teen Accounts.

| Content | Total videos shown to vulnerable teen accounts | frequency |
|---|--|-------------------|
| self-harm and suicide | 74 videos | every 97 seconds |
| eating disorders | 35 videos | every 206 seconds |
| self harm and suicide or eating disorders | 109 videos | every 66 seconds |



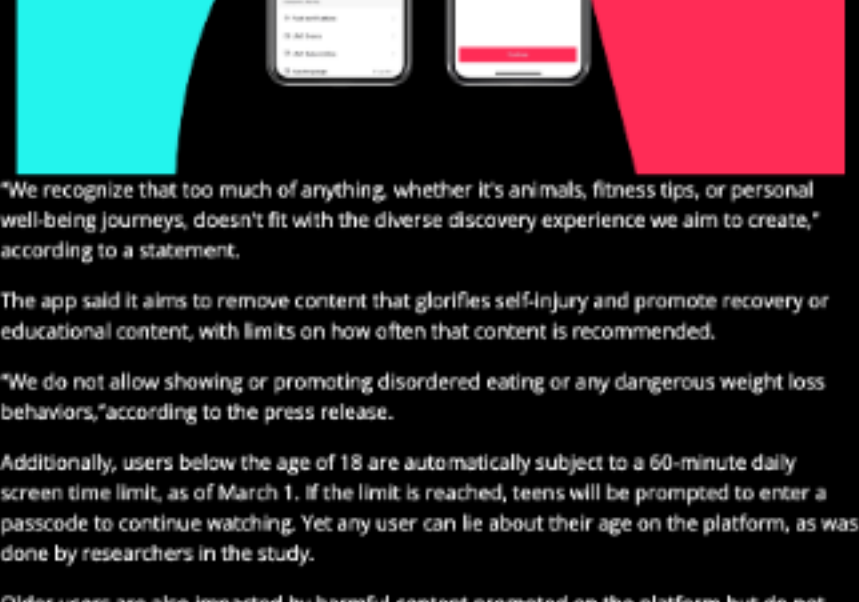
Damaging social media content promoting unhealthy behaviors can result in real life consequences. A British court ruled in September 2022 that Instagram and other social media platforms contributed to the death of Molly Russell, a 14-year-old girl who committed suicide. She saved, liked and shared 2,100 posts about depression, self-harm or suicide six months before she took her own life, according to data obtained by her parents.

While Meta claimed it has not researched the impact of suicidal content on young users, former Meta employee Frances Haugen blew the whistle on the Facebook Papers revealing the company had extensive data proving otherwise.

Internal documents in the Facebook files admitted "we make body image issues worse for one in three teen girls."

TikTok has been slow and ineffective in its damage control. Only seven of the 56 hashtags hosting eating disorder content were removed. One month after the CCDH report was released, eating disorder content garnered an additional 1.6 billion views in January 2023.

TikTok has since rolled out a new feature that allows users to refresh their 'For You' feed if their recommendations are no longer relevant. The app is working to limit recommendations of topics that could negatively impact a user if viewed repeatedly.



"We recognize that too much of anything, whether it's animals, fitness tips, or personal well-being journeys, doesn't fit with the diverse discovery experience we aim to create," according to a statement.

The app said it aims to remove content that glorifies self-harm and promote recovery or educational content, with limits on how often that content is recommended.

"We do not allow showing or promoting disordered eating or any dangerous weight loss behaviors," according to the press release.

Additionally, users below the age of 18 are automatically subject to a 60-minute daily screen time limit, as of March 1. If the limit is reached, teens will be prompted to enter a passcode to continue watching. Yet any user can lie about their age on the platform, as was done by researchers in the study.

Older users are also impacted by harmful content promoted on the platform but do not receive the same safety measures provided for minors. Eating disorders are most commonly developed at age 21, and suicide is more prevalent from age 25 onwards. About 5% of adults self harm, although the highest rates are found in teens and college students.

TikTok requires more transparency over the algorithm that pushes detrimental content to its young users or why that content varies based on a young accounts username. Counter Digital Hate aims to hold TikTok liable for its coding algorithm instead of allowing the platform to hide behind the shield of Section 230 and continue to put children and adults at risk.

"The stakes are too high for TikTok to continue to do nothing, or for our politicians to sit back and fail to act. We need platforms and politicians to have parents' backs, but right now they're putting profits before people," said the Counter Digital Hate CEO.