

Adolescent perspectives on mental health benefits and risks associated with TikTok use

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A new study examines adolescent perspectives on mental health benefits and risks associated with TikTok use. Findings from the study will be presented during the Pediatric Academic Societies (PAS) 2022 Meeting,

taking place April 21-25 in Denver.

"We conducted a focus group study to understand adolescent perspectives on mental health benefits and risks associated with TikTok use," said Bradley Kerr, MS, researcher with the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health. "Participants often described how TikTok's algorithm may uniquely enable adolescents to connect with peers around their interests and mental health struggles. Concerns such as excessive use of TikTok and peer comparison were also mentioned. Future work should focus on understanding and balancing these possible mental health benefit and risks."

Focus groups were asked about what differentiates TikTok from other [social media platforms](#) as well as [mental health benefits](#) and risks. The first theme was connection with TikTok content. One participant described the TikTok algorithm, "Pretty quickly it can kind of catch on to what you're interested in or what you find funny." The second theme was challenges self-regulating TikTok use. One participant shared, "I downloaded TikTok during quarantine, and I would say I was addicted to it for a while. I had to delete it off my phone because it just kind of consumed an unnecessary amount of time." The third theme was peer comparison. One participant shared that some TikTok videos "could definitely affect self-image, 'cause just unrealistic beauty standards, and really rich people, so that lifestyle's not always the most attainable." The fourth theme was mental health solidarity and competition. One participant reported, "It can be helpful in relating [to]...other people dealing with these kind of issues and kind of finding solidarity there, but on the other hand, it also can turn into competition." A minor theme was risky and harmful trends.

Table 1. Themes and illustrative quotations around adolescent perspectives on mental health benefits and risks of TikTok use

Theme	Illustrative quotations		
<p>Connection with TikTok content Participants characterized TikTok as a platform whose algorithm uniquely understands them and provides new, interesting content.</p>	<p><i>It's what you wanna see every time you go on it. And sometimes it'll give you new stuff, and then you decide if you wanna see more of that or not.</i></p>	<p><i>That's how I discover bands and different artists and things like that.</i></p>	<p><i>It's almost like this universal experience that we all get to, like, do together. But at the same time, it's a very personal thing that only you would go through your own TikTok.</i></p>
<p>Challenges self-regulating TikTok use Participants described how the design of TikTok makes it difficult for them to manage their time on the platform.</p>	<p><i>When I do I go on it for hours at a time without realizing it because I'll just keep scrolling and I'm like, "Okay, this is the last one," and then I scroll and it's a good one, a funny video and I'm like, "Okay, this is the last one," and it's just really addicting.</i></p>	<p><i>I will not open TikTok casually.</i></p>	<p><i>You will get sucked in, so you can't do it in public. You have to do it when you're getting ready to go to bed or having a meal by yourself.</i></p>
<p>Peer comparison Participants illustrated ways that peer comparison could be associated with mental health concerns like body dissatisfaction.</p>	<p><i>I think it's bad for... feeling not confident about your body and stuff too. Because if you get on that side of TikTok with the models and the fitness stuff, it's really hard to see.</i></p>	<p><i>Seeing someone's really nice house, or someone's really cute dog, or happy family, there's just so much content that you can just constantly compare and see what you want, what you hate, and just see the differences in people I guess is so visual, just like every other social media.</i></p>	<p><i>I saw my friend's For You page like a few weeks ago and it was just a bunch of really skinny, like beautiful women. And she would show me them and be like, "Oh my goodness, look at her."</i></p>
<p>Mental health solidarity and competition Participants explained that mental health struggles shared on TikTok may sometimes lead to support and solidarity, but other times can be met with competitive or unsupportive responses.</p>	<p><i>There's a TikTok trend right now where...it'll be like someone sharing their trauma or past experiences that have really upset them...It'll be something sad, like, "Yeah, like my mom, I don't know, yelled at me for not doing my homework." And they're like, "Oh yeah? Well, like, my mom this and that and that to me. So like, what you said isn't valid."</i></p>	<p><i>I feel like at some point it just starts turning into a competition and it's kind of just like, it's more normalized to, like, you're weird if you don't have a mental illness, which is just really annoying.</i></p>	<p><i>I've seen plenty of the ones that were just referenced where it says a general characteristic or, like, things you did as a child and guessing what you are like now, and lots of people responded to that, because they connect, they feel that they, like, fit in with that source, or they have found a community. And so, they kind of connect and build on each other.</i></p>
<p>Minor theme: Risky and harmful trends Participants described patterns of adolescents imitating risky or harmful behaviors seen on TikTok.</p>	<p><i>There are a whole lot of trends going around too that could definitely be kind of pressuring or influential to somebody's decision of how to behave and how to act, so they could potentially put them in risky positions.</i></p>	<p><i>I go to a Catholic school, and someone went into the chapel and stole a statue of Jesus, which I thought was kind of funny.</i></p>	<p><i>At my school, there's a lot of this trend called devious licks...trying to just deface property and it's moving in towards being violent towards teachers or towards staff members and stuff. And I feel like that could get pretty harmful for everybody involved.</i></p>

Table 1. Themes and illustrative quotations around adolescent perspectives on mental health benefits and risks of TikTok use. Credit: University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health

Future studies should examine mental health consequences associated with adolescent TikTok concerns such as challenges self-regulating use, peer comparison, and unsupportive mental [health](#) interactions.

More information: Conference: www.pas-meeting.org/

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