Teens on TikTok: Fun, but addictive and maybe harmful

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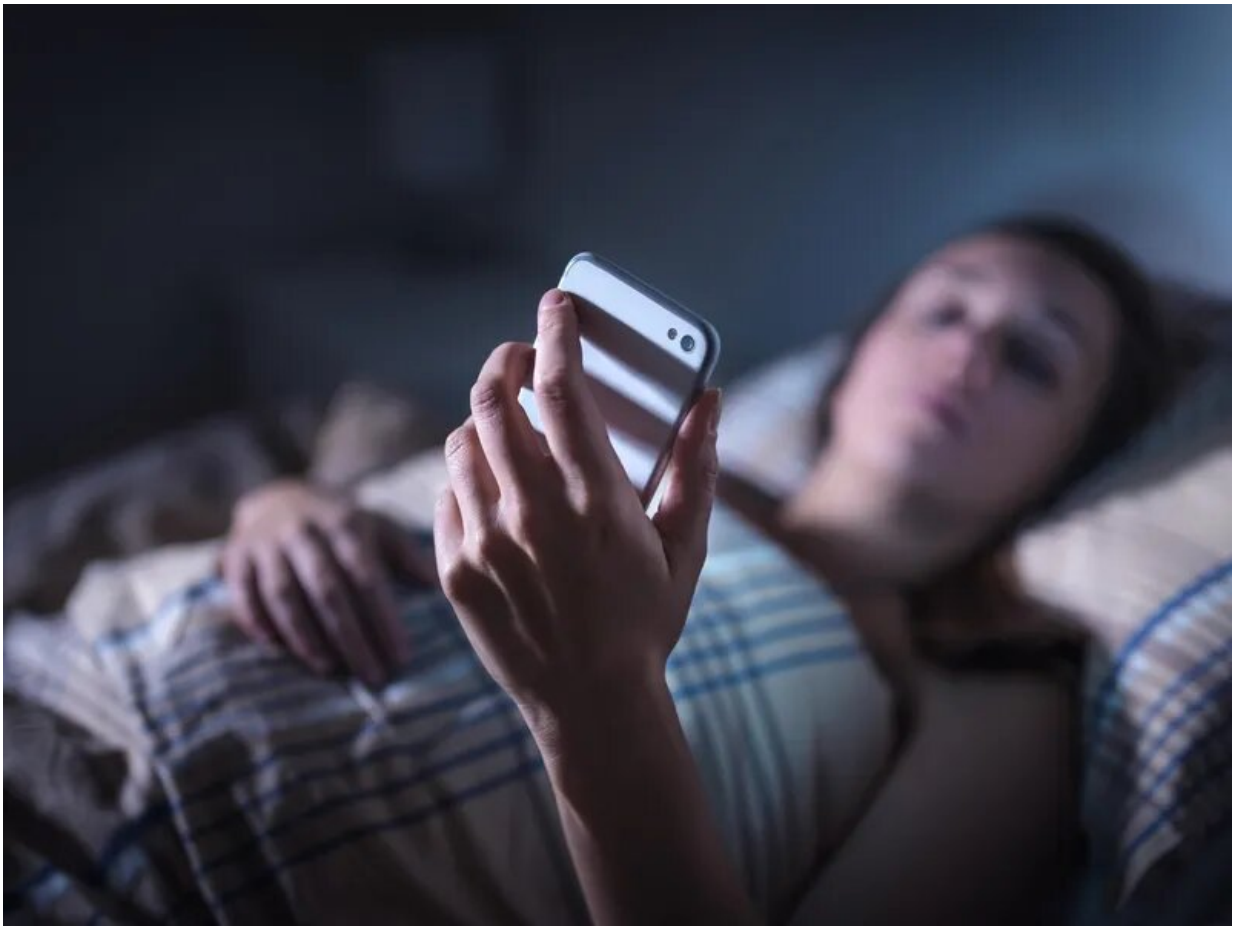

In the fall of 2021, TikTok announced a major milestone to coincide

with its fifth anniversary: The amassing of roughly 1 billion global users, many of them young, turning to the app every month as a way to view, make and share bite-sized videos.

But what exactly do those young users think of the app? Is it a boon to their self-esteem and creativity, or an addictive time-waster that creates unhealthy competition and expectations?

A small, new study suggests the answer is likely both.

"TikTok is an app used by many adolescents that features short videos on a wide range of topics," explained study author Bradley Kerr. He is a researcher in the department of pediatrics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health.

Though initially limited to 15 seconds in length, uploads—often featuring dancing, comedy sketches and lip-syncing sessions—can now run up to 10 minutes.

And with sound and movement central to the TikTok experience, it quickly set itself apart from other popular social media sites like Instagram—with roots in silent still imagery —and Facebook, where the initial focus was on status updates and friendship connections.

Despite its meteoric rise in popularity, "we haven't seen much research on how TikTok is related to mental health outcomes for adolescents," Kerr noted.

To fill in the blanks, he and his colleagues decided to solicit the opinions of 31 teens.

All were between the ages of 13 and 18 (average age of 16). Evenly divided between boys and girls, nearly all (29) said they had at least one

social media account. The study team noted that more than 60% of American teens say they regularly use TikTok.

Following a series of Zoom-based focus group sessions, investigators identified a number of recurring themes.

The first appeared to be mostly positive, given that "TikTok is really good at connecting [teens] with content that is interesting to them, and that they can enjoy with their peers," Kerr said.

"It's what you want to see every time you go on it," remarked one focus group participant, with another teen noting that it's "how I discover bands and different artists and things like that."

Still another indicated that "it's almost like this universal experience that we all get to, like, do together."

At the same time, some kids were uncomfortable with the addictive nature of the app.

"When I do [use TikTok]," one of the teens explained, "I go on it for hours at a time without realizing it because I'll just keep scrolling and I'm like, 'OK, this is the last one'"… only to keep on scrolling. Another described getting "sucked in."

In addition, some respondents suggested that the app's video avalanche of perfect bodies and seemingly perfect lives can undermine self-esteem.

"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," said one teen.

"I think it's bad for… feeling not confident about your body and stuff,

too," said another.

On the togetherness versus competitiveness front, the TikTok experience got mixed grades.

Some teens highlighted the app's upside, said Kerr, noting "how adolescents who are experiencing struggles related to their mental health or other challenges—such as understanding their sexual orientation—can use the app to connect with others and find solidarity and support."

But others noted that "at some point it just starts turning into a competition," with users often trying to one-up each other with posts that set out to be the happiest—or most horrible—tale ever told.

"While future studies are needed to understand these key research areas, we hope that parents and health care providers will ask adolescents about both benefits and concerns in their use of TikTok," Kerr said.

The findings were presented Saturday at a meeting of the Pediatric Academic Societies, in Denver. Such research should be considered preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed journal.

According to Melissa Hunt, associate director of clinical training in the department of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, "Since social media and TikTok are here to stay, we need to take a harm-reduction approach to them." Hunt was not involved in the new study

"On the one hand, social media is like nicotine or opiates. They were engineered to be addictive, and to some extent, the companies that produce the product have attempted to suppress research showing the harmful effects. On the other hand, we know that modest engagement with social media can be fun and can increase connectedness," Hunt

said.

"Thus, the better metaphor for these products is alcohol," she added. "Teach kids how to use it wisely and in moderation, and monitor their use."

More information: There's more on social media use and teens at the Mayo Clinic.