

# The digital mirror and its effect on teens' mental health

By Clarissa Dean

---

My experience with social media has been rocky. When I entered the wrath of middle school, the days of Musical.ly, now known as TikTok, were thriving. Videos posted mainly came from those considered “popular” individuals.

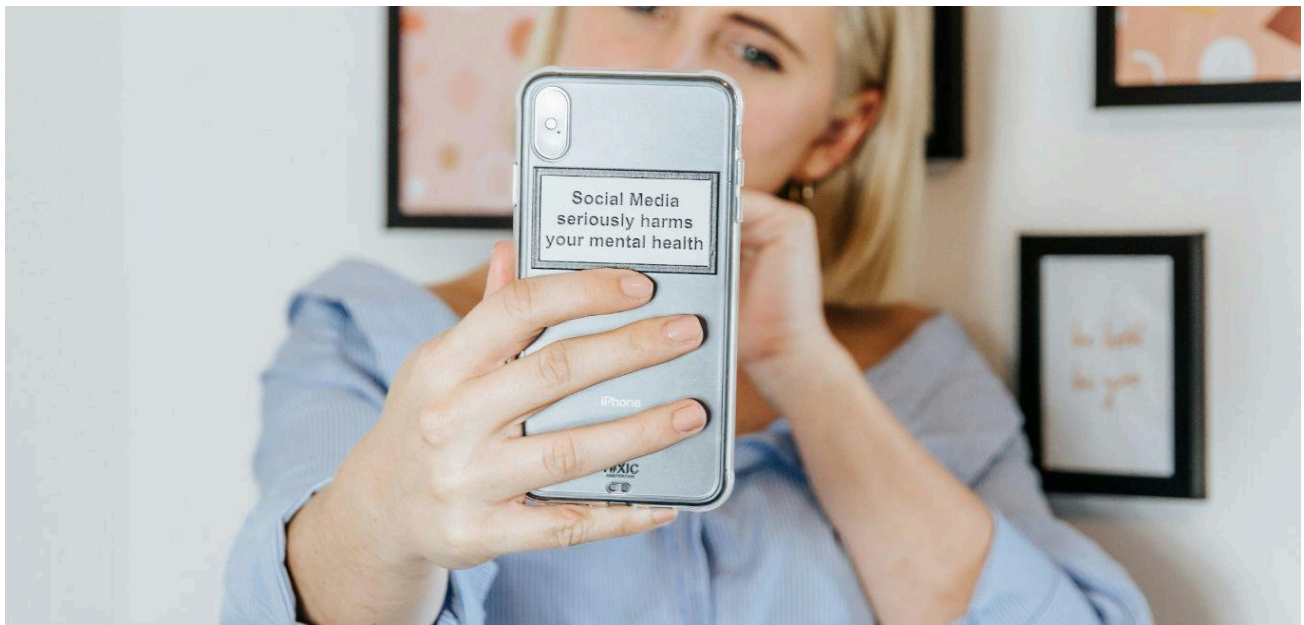


Photo courtesy of Unsplash

As more videos surfaced and the app grew, beauty standards began to rise. Seeing the thinner image of a woman with long blonde hair and blue eyes, almost always athletic, crowded my “For You Page.” From there, my own body image began plummeting as I noticed I did not look like what other women my age looked like.

To me, it became more than an app. It was a mirror that constantly reminded me of who I wasn't. Looking back, I realize how damaging it was to my self-image, even when I thought I was just scrolling for fun.

Teenagers across the world battle with body image and mental health struggles daily. While some may argue that social media can be used to help with mental health struggles, the psychological effects of social media on teens overpower the advantages.

## Swipe, scroll, stress

Between the ages of 10 and 19, the human brain continues to develop. According to Yale Medicine's [website](#), at this age, the brain is going through a sensitive period where feelings of anxiety are forming. At this age, teens' brains are still developing, and identity processes make them more susceptible to social comparisons. TikTok thrives on comparison. Every swipe puts teens up against an idealized version of someone else's life or body. I have compared myself to people I don't even know, yet felt like I should somehow measure up to them.

In fact, the [World Health Organization](#) reports that one in seven adolescents experiences a mental health disorder, a figure that illustrates the scale of the problem and the need for action.



Photo courtesy of Pixabay

TikTok's endless "For You Page" is powered by an algorithm that quickly adapts to a user's viewing habits. According to TikTok's [website](#), the content that appears on a user's "For You Page" is tailored to each user by their user interactions. For example, if you like or share certain videos that can damage your mental health, different videos along the lines of that one will begin appearing.

Due to this, it is important to avoid interacting with videos that can cause a strain on your mental health. I've learned the hard way that the more I engage with negative or appearance-based content, the more toxic my feed becomes. I clicked on one "body transformation" video on TikTok, and the next day my feed had many videos surrounding weight-loss tips and appearance-based videos, making me feel worse about myself. TikTok's algorithm does not

care about mental health. It only cares about engagement. If you see a video that triggers your mental health, it is best to scroll past it to avoid these videos popping up in the future.

## The good, the bad and the filtered

While some people believe that social media can negatively affect mental health, others lean in the other direction and believe social media has more positive influences than negative. An article from [Very Well Mind](#) examines many possible psychological benefits that social media can have. Some of these include social support, identity exploration, and even increased access to mental-health resources. Varney explains that apps such as Calm, Happify, and Headspace can help improve mental health by sharing tips and tools for a positive headspace.

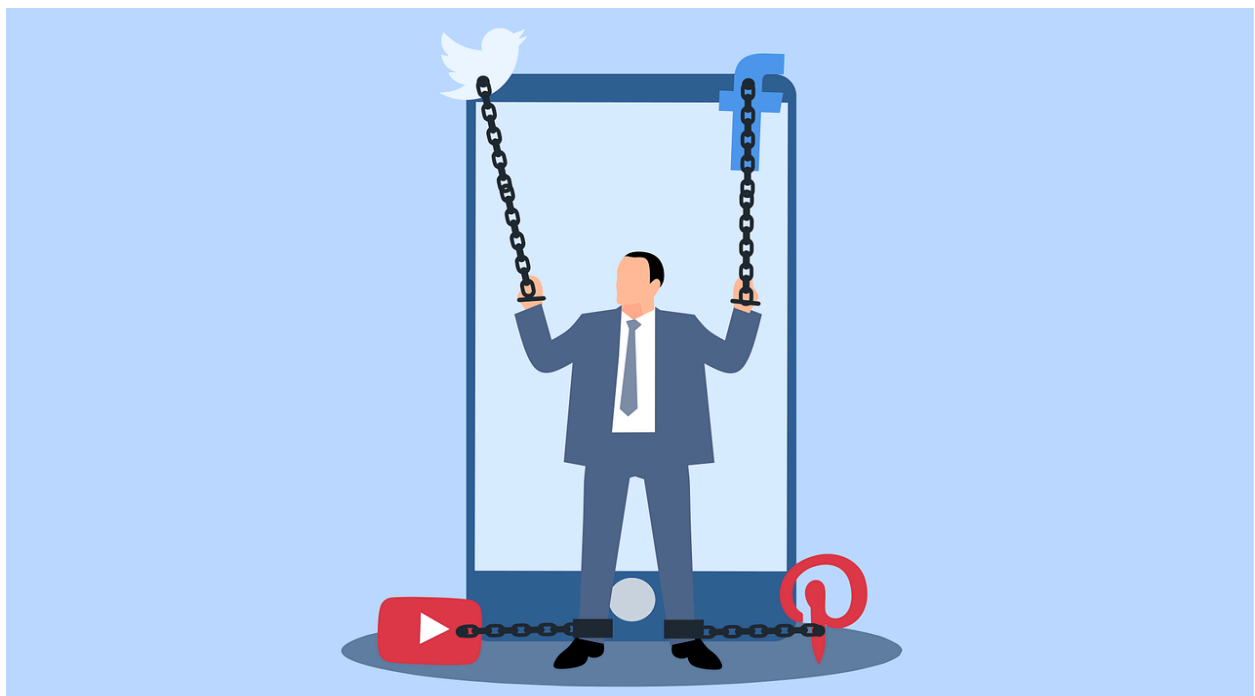


Photo courtesy of Pixabay

I don't deny that these tools exist; however, the benefits rarely outweigh the harm. For every positive post, there are hundreds more that reinforce comparison, judgment and unrealistic standards. For every supportive mental health video, there are hundreds more that spread misinformation and disguise insecurity as self-experience. TikTok does not just reflect mental health issues. It amplifies them.

An [article](#) in the Los Angeles Times tells the story of Antonia Chow, who spent an increasing amount of time on his phone. Because of this, his grades began to slip, and he became distant from his friends and family.

Additionally, the article explains that 14-year-old Shira Cohen feels social media can cause a lot of body image issues. While Cohen was searching for inspiration on Pinterest, her feed fell into

photos about women who were said to have “perfect bodies.” Because of this, she compared herself to these women and began wearing loose-fitted clothes to hide her body. When it comes to body image, eating disorders become a concern.

The Los Angeles Times also explains that when teens are exposed to unattainable physical appearances, it could cause low self-esteem and eating disorders in an attempt to gain the body image that is seen online. It has also been reported that discussing and showing content that is extreme or suicide related can normalize those behaviors.

## Fixing the feed

Age restrictions for younger teens have become apparent on certain social media apps as well. For example, TikTok has a “Youth Safety and Well-Being section,” according to their [website](#). This restriction is meant to keep the platform safer for the younger age groups. Their website explains that you have to be 16 or older to use Direct Messages. Additionally, this restriction filters content, not allowing harmful videos to appear on these feeds.

While that sounds reassuring, I’ve noticed these filters rarely work in practice and harmful content still slips through. This urgency underscores the need for greater awareness, in-person connections, guidance, and interventions to protect teens from the most harmful effects of social media.



Photo courtesy of Pixabay

The [National Library of Medicine](#) (NCIB) also provides statistics on how social media can be seen as beneficial. For individuals who do struggle with mental health, NCIB said that it may be easier to communicate online rather than in person. According to NCIB, “Online interactions may be easier for individuals with impaired social functioning...” A [different article](#) on NCIB explains how, if social media is used excessively, it can lead to negative mental health outcomes. Some of these outcomes include “... social anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, reduced sleep quality, and higher perceived stress.”

Misinformation and graphic images can also cause implications for mental health. It is important to note that not everything is as it seems on social media. These contrasting perspectives highlight the ongoing debate over whether social media serves more as a tool for connection and support or as a source of harm that requires stricter regulation. Specifically, TikTok leans toward harm due to its design, making it nearly impossible to engage with content casually without emotional consequences.

## **Mind over media**

The ongoing debate over social media's role in mental health underscores both its potential benefits and risks. While existing work highlights risks and benefits, few sources directly address how social media can empower adolescents to navigate harmful content themselves. Addressing the need requires balanced solutions that provide practical guidelines and thoughtful regulation.



Photo courtesy of Unsplash

Social media does far more to shape insecurity than to build confidence. By personally feeling this pressure in my own experiences, I know that the harm of social media outweighs the help. The idea that teens can gain more help with mental health than affect their mental health is unrealistic when algorithms intentionally feed them addictive and damaging content.

If social media companies such as TikTok continue to brand themselves as safe spaces while promoting unrealistic beauty standards, we are ignoring the truth. Protecting mental health means rethinking how we interact with popular platforms and admitting

that social media is not harmless. Until we do that, the negative psychological effects of social media will only deepen.