

Instagram, TikTok compete over teen safety

Article

The news: Multiple Facebook studies concluded that Instagram adversely affects teens, per a Wall Street Journal report.

Among the findings:

- **32% of teenage girls** indicated that when they had negative thoughts about their appearance, Instagram exacerbated those feelings.
- **14% of teenage boys in the US** said Instagram worsened how they felt about themselves.

- **13% of teens in the UK and 6% of teens in the US** who reported suicidal thoughts traced those thoughts back to Instagram usage.
- **More than 40% of teen users** in the US and UK who felt “unattractive” traced those feelings to Instagram.
- “Social comparison is worse on Instagram,” said one 2020 Facebook memo. It noted that TikTok’s focus on theatrics and Snapchat’s filters (often silly ones) that focus on facial close-ups avoid similar comparison issues.
- Instagram’s Explore page often pushes users toward potentially harmful content.

The challenge: Moving forward, the platform will need to balance solving this problem with keeping younger users engaged; **more than 40% of its users are 22 years old or younger**, per Facebook memos reviewed by The Journal.

In response to The Journal story, Instagram published a blog post asserting that social media has positive and negative impacts on users, citing two 2018 studies as evidence.

TikTok sees an opportunity: The Instagram rival announced steps it’s taking to protect users.

- When users search for eating disorder-related terms, instead of displaying harmful content, TikTok directs them to in-app support resources where they can call or send an SMS to the National Eating Disorders Association.
- It developed safety guides in partnership with the International Association for Suicide Prevention and other suicide prevention organizations.
- It also added public service announcements at the top of certain hashtag pages, like #whatieatinaday, that may include a mix of positive and negative content.

This head-to-head on user safety comes as Instagram faces growing pressure from TikTok in other areas. **In Q2, TikTok’s engagement rate for megainfluencer content was 11.83%** compared with 0.35% on Instagram, per a recent CreatorIQ study. CreatorIQ defines megainfluencers as accounts with 1 million or more followers.

What this means: Facebook announced plans for a version of Instagram targeted at kids 13 and younger, but that may become more difficult due to The Journal's story.

- Without taking aggressive steps to solve the problem, Facebook could tempt regulators to get involved.

- There's bipartisan criticism of how Facebook handles mental health issues, including from Reps. Lori Trahan, D-M.A., and Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-W.A. Trahan has stated that Facebook should “immediately abandon plans for Instagram for Kids,” per CNBC.
- “Facebook has already faced significant pressure to abandon its plans for a kids’ version of Instagram,” said Debra Aho Williamson, eMarketer principal analyst at Insider Intelligence. “We believe these new revelations could force Facebook to acquiesce and shelve the project.”

**US Teens' Favorite Social Media Platform,
Spring 2018-Spring 2021**

% of respondents

	Spring 2018	Fall 2018	Spring 2019	Fall 2019	Spring 2020	Fall 2020	Spring 2021
Snapchat	45%	46%	41%	44%	36%	34%	31%
TikTok	-	-	-	-	13%	29%	30%
Instagram	26%	32%	35%	35%	31%	25%	24%
Discord	-	-	2%	2%	2%	3%	5%
Twitter	9%	6%	6%	3%	4%	3%	3%
Facebook	8%	5%	6%	3%	4%	2%	2%

Note: excludes "other" responses; teens with an average age of 16.1

Source: Piper Sandler, "Taking Stock With Teens" in partnership with DECA, April 7, 2021

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