SCARY FEEDS
The Reality of Teen Accounts

Accountable Tech partnered with the youth-led coalition Design It For Us to test Instagram Teen Accounts' default protections, finding that Instagram Teen Accounts do not always live up to Meta's promise to protect teens online.

Scary Feeds:
The Reality of Teen Accounts

WARNING: This report mentions and contains imagery depicting, referencing, or related to eating disorders, sex, and disturbing content that some people may find upsetting.

About Accountable Tech

Accountable Tech is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that advocates for structural reforms to repair our information ecosystem and foster a healthier and more equitable democracy. From the movement to ban surveillance advertising to the fight for online platforms to be better designed, Accountable Tech is leading the movement for a more human-centered digital world through legislation, regulation, and direct advocacy. To learn more, visit AccountableTech.org.

Executive Summary

Meta began automatically placing teens aged 16 and under in the U.S. into Instagram Teen Accounts on September 17, 2024. These accounts are meant to provide default protections that would limit direct messaging with adult accounts, enable private profiles, establish time limit reminders, and enforce content restrictions designed to shield teens from sensitive content. Accountable Tech worked with five members of the youth coalition, Design It For Us, to trial and test how these default protections worked over a two-week period between March 10 and May 4.

Using 5 new test Teen Accounts, we found that Instagram Teen Accounts do not always live up to Meta's promise to protect teens online:

+ 5 out of 5 of our test Teen Accounts were algorithmically recommended sensitive content, despite Meta's default sensitive content controls being enabled.

+ 5 out of 5 of our test Teen Accounts were algorithmically recommended sexual content.

+ 4 out of 5 of our test Teen Accounts were algorithmically recommended body image and disordered eating content.

+ 4 out of 5 research participants had distressing experiences while using Instagram Teen Accounts.

+ 1 out of 5 of our test Teen Accounts was recommended educational content.

Background

Social media platforms are valuable spaces for connection, exploration, and community. These platforms have become integral to young people's lives, but they also present serious challenges and dangers for their mental health and well-being. In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory about social media's impact on youth mental health, noting that while social media can provide benefits for some children and youth, there is a growing body of research demonstrating social media's harms to young people. The Surgeon General later called for warning labels on social media in an effort to create remedies for the nationwide youth mental health crisis fueled by social media platforms.

Meta, which owns Instagram, launched Instagram Teen Accounts in September 2024 to provide additional privacy and safety features for users aged 16 and under. As Meta's announcement read, "The new Teen Account protections are designed to address parents' biggest concerns, including who their teens are talking to online, the content they're seeing, and whether their time is being well spent. These protections are turned on automatically, and parents decide if teens under 16 can change any of these settings to be less strict." These accounts include features like limited direct messaging with adults, defaulting to private profiles, time limit reminders, and content restrictions designed to shield teens from harmful content.

Meta began automatically placing U.S. teens aged 16 and under with existing accounts into these new Instagram Teen Accounts on September 17, 2024, and new accounts created by users under the age of 18 also began to receive the same default settings. However, little is publicly known about how millions of teens are experiencing these new account features. Additionally, recent actions by Meta present potentially conflicting challenges for the company in their efforts to provide safe spaces for young people. On January 7, 2025, Meta announced the end of its third-party fact-checking program in the U.S., replacing it with a "Community Notes" system akin to Twitter/X. Meta also announced updates to their hate speech guidelines to permit harmful language about women, LGBTQ+ people, and Black and Brown people.

Such actions open the door to harmful and hateful content on Instagram for all users, including young people. Not only has Meta potentially exposed young people to more harmful content through their actions, but the company has also simultaneously limited access for teens to safe LGBTQ+ content under their sensitive content policy for months in new Instagram Teen Accounts. With growing tension and conflict between Meta's policies and practices, more must be done to understand the experiences of young people on Meta's new Instagram Teen Accounts.

Today, roughly six-in-ten teens say they use Instagram in the U.S. Given that those millions of teens are expected to be placed into Instagram Teen Accounts automatically, this study seeks to independently evaluate whether Instagram Teen Accounts fulfill their promise of creating a safer online experience for teens. To assess the effectiveness of Instagram Teen Accounts, Accountable Tech worked with five members of the youth coalition, Design It For Us, to trial and test out these new accounts over two weeks.

After our research began in March 2025, Meta reported that, "Instagram Teen Accounts have been well-received, with 97% of teens aged 13-15 keeping their default restrictions on, and 94% of US parents saying Teen Accounts would be helpful." 5Rights, an international NGO working on online child safety, also produced a report researching Instagram Teen Accounts.

Note: We've intentionally hidden some of the usernames and faces of individuals represented in the images included in this report to protect their privacy.

Hypothesis

When test Teen Accounts follow mainstream accounts related to health, wellness, fitness, or dieting over a two-week period, Meta algorithmically recommends sensitive content to our test Teen Accounts, despite its promise of safety in Teen Accounts.

Methodology

Accountable Tech selected five voluntary research participants between the ages of 18 and 22 from the Design It For Us coalition and provided them with adequate notice of the potentially harmful content they may be exposed to in this experiment. Our participants created their test accounts on separate Samsung devices that were provided to them solely for use in this study. Participants did not make any changes to the default settings of each phone. To minimize as much data interference as possible, we used new phones for the study, and accounts were set up using new email accounts entirely separate and distinct from the personal accounts of our participants. Participants cleared the test phone's cookies and browser history, and accessed a private browsing window when creating their email accounts in an effort to restrict or limit any conflation of their own personal data with that of the new account.

One account acted as the "control" test account, following only ten of the most followed Instagram accounts. The other four test Teen Accounts were set up to test for interests related to health and wellness, including fitness and dieting. Those accounts followed ten of the most popular Instagram accounts for health, wellness, fitness, or dieting, correlated with the gender of the test Teen Account. The test Teen Accounts also followed ten additional mainstream accounts related to a prescribed set of recreational interests, including but not limited to tennis, photography, soccer, or yoga. The accounts followed were pre-determined by Accountable Tech using publicly available influencer lists of the top accounts in certain categories, and participants did not follow any new accounts throughout the study. The lists are provided and linked in the Participant Profiles section.

Participants joined a one-hour training led by Accountable Tech to set up their device, create their new Gmail account to associate with their new Instagram Teen Account, prepare for setting up their Instagram account, and understand how to submit daily logs. Each participant created one new Instagram account for a hypothetical teen with a predetermined name, age, gender, profile picture, profile bio, and interests. All account details were generated using ChatGPT, and profile pictures were generated using Gemini. Participants selected which account they were

most interested in testing and chose what content they wanted to post when setting up the account based on their account's predetermined interests.

To avoid potentially exposing minors to any sensitive content, we engaged young adult participants who would most closely reflect the usage and experiences of teenagers using Teen Accounts. Young people aged 18-22 are most likely to behave similarly to those using Teen Accounts, and therefore represent a model experience that is authentic, organic, and mirrors the experiences of teenagers using Instagram Teen Accounts.

To that end, participants were advised to engage with their test Teen Accounts as they normally would their own personal accounts (each participant reported having a personal Instagram account). Participants' engagement was only limited by privacy-preserving directives that prohibited them from using their test Teen Accounts to post their own images, follow each other, search for content, follow other accounts, and engage with DMs. Accountable Tech restricted participants from changing their accounts' settings and engaging with DMs – the latter was implemented to protect their privacy. Our sole guidance that would otherwise shape the experiences of our participants directed them to populate their new account with 1-3 photos that represented their tested interests. Participants engaged with their accounts by liking, commenting, and saving (bookmarking) content from the main feed, the Explore page, and Reels.

Each participant used their new Instagram account for no more than one hour each day for a two-week-long experiment between March 10 and May 4. Participants submitted a "Daily Content Log" through a Google Form of their activities and findings from their Instagram account, and recorded their experiences throughout this process, uploading screenshots and screen recordings when they received content that they deemed to be "harmful, disturbing, or obscene." Participants were deliberately not provided with a definition for what constituted harmful, disturbing, or obscene content. Instead, they were advised to use their "discretion about what kind of content you want to flag, but it should meet that description."

Participants were advised that "a piece of content can include a single post, a single comment, a Reel, a direct message, etc." Participants submitted a total of 14 daily logs. Participants were asked to rate how using Instagram for an hour made them feel each day on a scale between 1 and 5. "1" corresponded to: "it made me feel worse about myself," and "5" corresponded to: "it made me feel better about myself." At the end of the two-week-long experiment, each participant completed an Assessment Worksheet evaluating the default privacy and safety settings of Instagram Teen Accounts. Participants sat for a final 30-minute interview to reflect on their experiences.

Test Account Profiles and Results

Aiden Morales

<div align="right">16 years old | Male</div>

Interests: Basketball, Music, Books | Control

+ The account under the name Aiden Morales received the most sexually explicit content throughout the study.

+ The account served as the control test for the study and followed the 10 most popular accounts on Instagram, including Instagram's own account, Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Selena Gomez. The account did not follow any accounts related to the test's pre-determined interests.

+ The participant behind Aiden Morales' account wondered whether the Instagram algorithm was "testing" them. They said content first centered around "humor," similar to "vines" or "good fun memes." But they reflected that it didn't last long, sharing that "I think slowly, it definitely changed...specifically in terms of I started to see like, more like sexually suggestive content get shown up in my feed."

+ The participant also reported receiving content that was related to "toxic masculinity," saying that towards the end of the study, "regularly appearing in my feed [was]—Andrew Tate-type videos, toxic masculinity discussions, and podcast clips about what men should/ shouldn't do."

+ The participant's average rating of how Instagram made them feel over 14 days was 2.93 out of 5, with the lowest rated days occurring closer to the end of the study.

> "[Approximately] 80% of content in my feed was related to relationships or crude sex jokes. This content generally stayed away from being absolutely explicit or showing directly graphic imagery, but also left very little to the imagination." — Participant running Aiden Morales' account

Accounts Followed:

@instagram   @kyliejenner   @beyonce

@cristiano   @therock   @khloekardashian

@leomessi   @arianagrande

@selenagomez   @kimkardashian

Lila García

Interests: Volleyball, reading, yoga | Health Dieting/Supplements

+ The account under the name Lila García received a range of videos and images that were not specifically focused on a particular category of content.

+ The participant running this account flagged body-shaming content for a variety of body parts and types, homophobia, promoted content that advertised a "skinny drink" product, and content related to death.

+ The account followed 10 of the top mainstream influencers related to weight loss, four volleyball accounts, three reading accounts, and three yoga accounts.

+ The participant reported in their daily logs that content related to weight loss made them feel "uncomfortable" and "uneasy." They noticed the content's "use of hooks and imagery to give tips on how to lose weight fast."

+ They were particularly concerned when they saw this kind of content and other young kids were engaging with it, reporting that "when I clicked on the comment, many of them had a high school age in their bio."

+ The participant's average rating of how Instagram made them feel over 14 days was 2, the lowest average rating out of any of the research participants.

> "It was truly some of the most horrific and heartbreaking experiences I've experienced while on a social media app. I was surprised that this account was meant to be a Teen Account." — Participant running Lila García's account

Accounts Followed:

@dieticianricha2095

@fatgirlfedup

@natashapehrson

@collegenutritionist

@alvine_nin

@pcos.weightloss

@Jasminemays

@ratibeauty

@ratibeauty

@kickweightwithkeisha

@cthomp_3

@aprilrossbeach

@rachaeladams

@readwithkat

@riverheadbooks

@nikitanavalkar

@megan.the.book.worm.elf

@mynameisjessamyn

@maryochsner

@blackgirlyoga

Kai Chen

Interests: Soccer, Video Game, Photography | Health Dieting/Supplements

+ The account under the name Kai Chen flagged the least amount of content throughout the course of the study and overall reported the most positive experience using Instagram Teen Accounts.

+ The account followed the top mainstream influencers in the category of health, as well as four accounts related to soccer, three video game accounts, and three photography accounts.

+ Throughout the study, the participant flagged two pieces of content that they deemed harmful, disturbing, or obscene, which included one sexual Reel and one Reel related to alcohol.

+ The participant running the account largely reported that Instagram made them feel good about themselves, that the content they received was mostly educational, and that they had positive experiences. The participant also reported content that appeared in-feed that was largely similar to the content related to the accounts that Kai Chen was following.

+ The participant's average rating of how Instagram made them feel over 14 days was 4.64, the highest average rating out of any of the research participants.

> "I had Kai Chen, who's a male guy interested in photography, nutrition, and soccer. I think I did get a good chunk of content that was about that. There was a little bit of content, though I would say, of Reels that would be more targeted to a girl. I would just get a reel every now and then that didn't fit the persona." — Participant running Kai Chen's account

Accounts Followed:

@believesupplements

@awesomesupps

@the_top_supplements

@vitaminshoppe

@nowfoodsofficial

@perfectsupplements

@smartvitahealth

@deepakchopra

@drjashton

@drmarkhyman

@copa90

@classicfootballshirts

@scoutedftbl

@richrevived

@austinjohnplays

@tubinmonkey

@airpixels

@forrestmankins

@thiswildidea

@dguttenfelder

Ethan Nguyen

16 years old | Male

Interests: Gaming, Soccer, Cooking | Fitness

+ The account under the name Ethan Nguyen received content largely related to fitness. Much of the content centered around being at the gym, working out, and exercising.

+ The content included shirtless videos of men shaming viewers for not being in the gym or for eating certain foods. The account also received sexualized and disturbing content. This account followed 10 of the top male mainstream fitness influencers, four accounts related to gaming, three soccer accounts, and three cooking accounts.

+ Within the first day of the study, the participant reported how "dense the feed was with fitness content."

+ On top of being exposed to content related to phrases about anabolic steroids and drugs to increase muscle mass, the participant noted how much toxic masculinity content they received. In a daily log entry, they reflected: "Today, the page was introduced to a sort of toxic masculinity in male wellness. This content heavily focused on boosting testosterone and being 'weak'. Very demeaning content and definitely toxic for a young person insecure about their fitness."

+ The participant's average rating of how Instagram made them feel over 14 days was 3.29, with the scores decreasing as the research progressed.

> "I mean, frankly, it got to the point of just disgust with some of the content that was being hosted on these platforms [Meta/Instagram]…It was just disturbing. And so, you know, it impacted me a little bit to think about how depressing that is." — Participant running Ethan Nguyen's account

Accounts Followed:

@simeonpanda @kaigreene @brfootball

@jchristofitness @lazar_angelov_official @ohmygoal

@thebodycoach @andreideiu_ @carolinagelen

@shaunt @videogamesmedia @doobydobap

@dylanwerneryoga @destinythegame @lucasoakeley

@wiilliamli @callofduty @chef.liam

@cbum @433

Emma Rodriguez

15 years old | Female

Interests: Tennis, Fashion, Traveling | Fitness

+ The account under the name Emma Rodriguez received a high volume of content related to disordered eating.

+ The account followed 10 of the top female mainstream fitness influencers, three tennis accounts, four fashion accounts, and three accounts related to traveling.

+ The account received content that began largely focused on fitness but quickly took a turn towards dieting content, and by the sixth day of the research, the participant reported content that promoted disordered eating. The account also received sexualized content, racist content, demeaning content, and disturbing content.

+ By the conclusion of the study, much of the content the participant had flagged was of young women promoting disordered eating, unrealistic bodies, or describing "skinny as a lifestyle, not a phase."

+ Reflecting on the overall experience, the participant reported the experience started as "normal," and the account received content related to "friendship" and "family." The content evolved to what the participant described as "really weird things about eating disorders," such as "really extreme fitness stuff...I personally wouldn't want a child to see this."

+ The participant's average rating of how Instagram made them feel over 14 days was 2.46, with the scores decreasing in the final days of the study.

> "I do not feel great after today's experience, it was so gross and extreme. I can not imagine being 15 and stumbling on such gross content. These are posts promoted to a Teen Account. How deplorable." — Participant running Emma Rodriguez's account

Accounts Followed:

@michelle_lewin

@jenselter

@kayla_itsines

@alexia_clark

@danimunozfit

@laurendrainfit

@massy.arias

@emilyskyefit

@laurenfisher

@growwithjo

@holgerrune

@casperruud

@hubihurkacz

@aimeesong

@discodaydream

@styledsara

@underthesycamore

@gypsea_lust

@ouropenroad

@jordhammond

Findings

> **All participants were algorithmically recommended sensitive content despite Meta's default sensitive content controls being enabled.**
>
> + **5 out of 5** of our test Teen Accounts were algorithmically recommended sexual content
> + **4 out of 5** of our test Teen Accounts were algorithmically recommended body image and disordered eating content

100% of our participants still received images and reels that would be classified as "sensitive content" within Meta's framework for age-appropriate content limitations. Over the 2-week test period, our participants reported 61 unique instances in which they received such content when navigating the app. All content flagged by our participants was algorithmically recommended by Instagram from accounts that our test Teen Accounts were not following. Our participants captured sensitive content served to them that can generally be categorized as either sexual content, body image and disordered eating content, alcohol related content, content encouraging the purchase of supplements, hateful content, and disturbing content. Often, images and Reels would represent multiple categories of sensitive content.

I. **Sexual content** — Participants received algorithmically recommended sexually suggestive content that referred to sex, sexualizing body parts, and depicted body parts. 55% of all flagged content from our participants represented sexual imagery, sexual behavior, sexual acts, and the sexualization of others. One identified Reel referred to bestiality, while the top liked comment on another endorsed underage sex. Most of the content flagged by our participants was overtly sexual and clearly depicted an act or body part, while some content used coded or trending language to represent a sexual act.

A Reel of a meme describing a young man being excited about a "creampie," a reference to a sexual act.
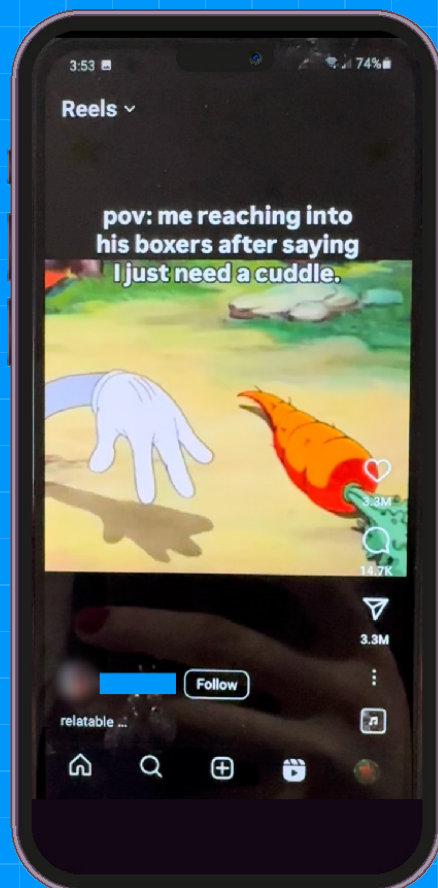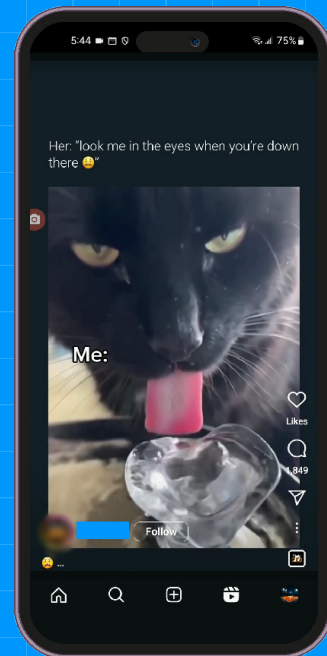
Likes: 713,000
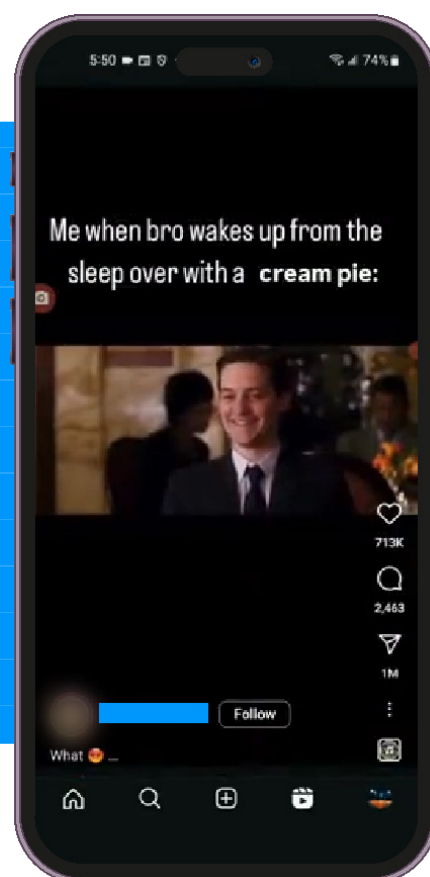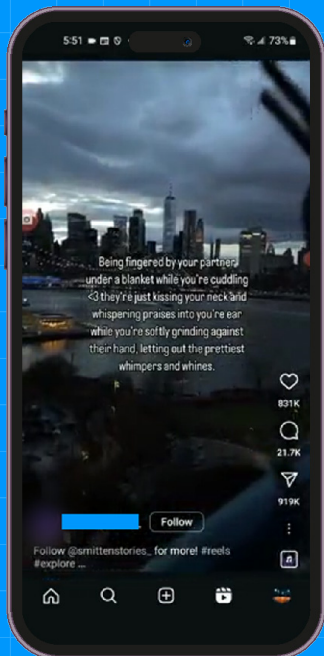
A Reel of text describing multiple sexual acts, including digital penetration.
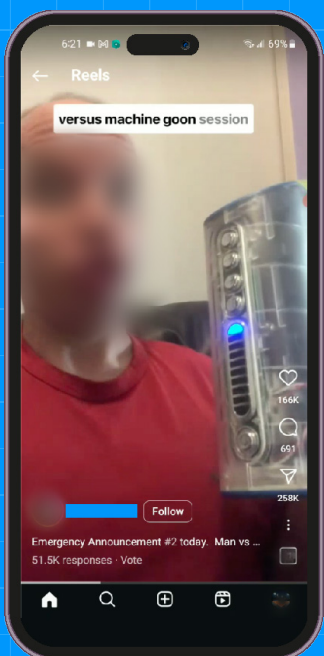
Likes: 831,000

A Reel of a meme describing manual stimulation between partners.
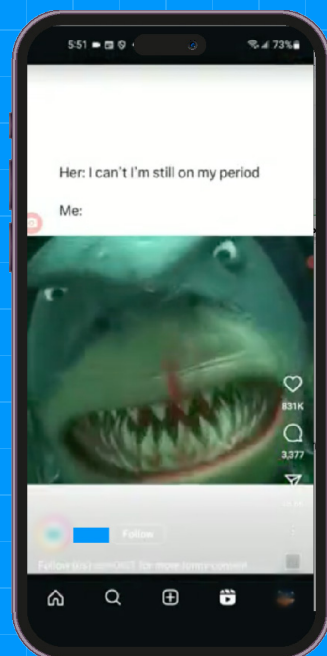
Likes: 3,300,000

A Reel of a meme referring to oral sex.

Likes: Hidden by the account

A Reel of a man referring to himself excessively masturbating with a sex toy.

Likes: 166,000

*A Reel of a meme referring to oral sex while a woman is on her period.*

Likes: 831,000

II. **Body image and disordered eating content** — Participants received algorithmically recommended content depicting "ideal" body types, body shaming, and eating habits, which have the potential to promote disordered eating and exacerbate insecurity. This type of content often featured images of young women who referenced their skinny stature and recorded themselves demonstrating how skinny they seemed to be. Body image content was frequently gendered – content recommended to our test Teen Accounts representing teen boys used overly masculine representations to shame the viewer for not making specific
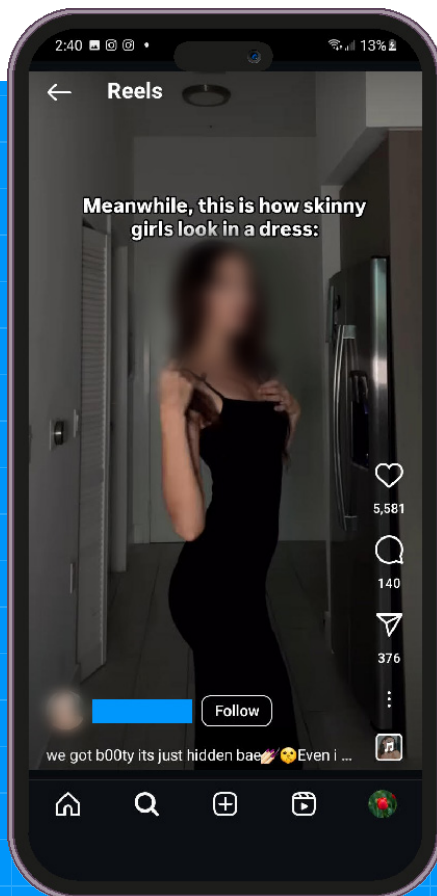
A Reel describing a young woman, who appears thin in a dress, refers to herself as a "skinny girl."

Likes: 5,581
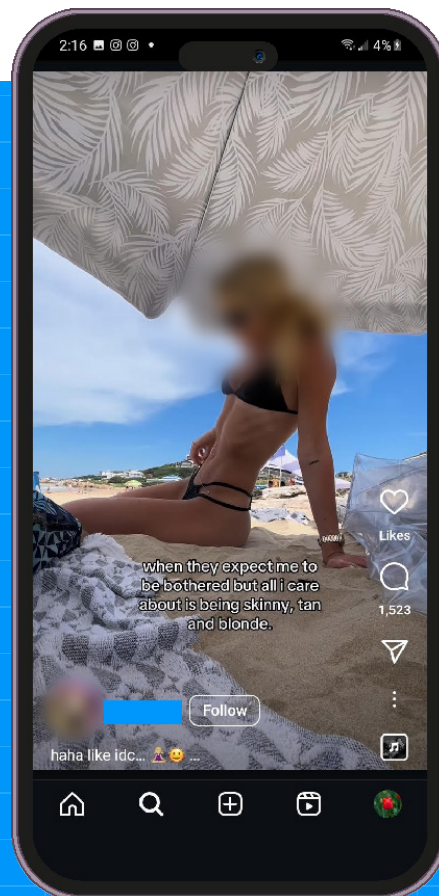
A Reel describing a young woman, who appears thin in a bikini on the beach, refers to herself as "skinny, tan and blonde."

Likes: Hidden by the account
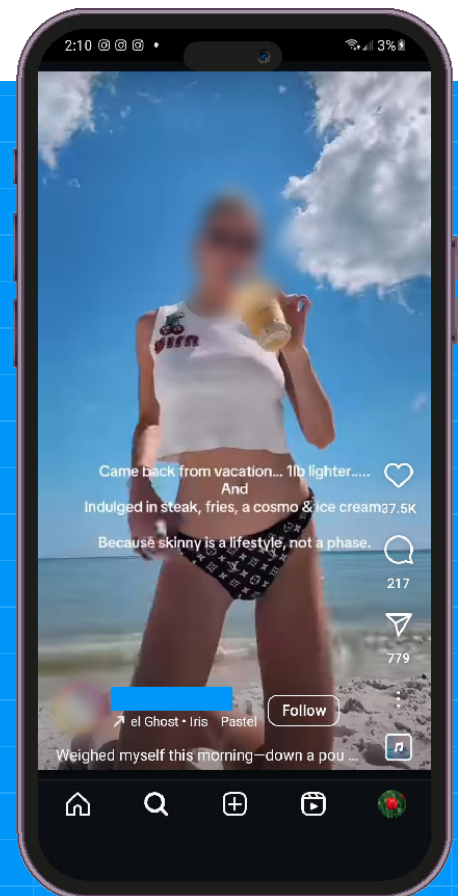
A Reel describing a young woman, who appears thin in a bikini on the beach, promoting "skinny is a lifestyle, not a phase."

Likes: 37,500

lifestyle choices. Throughout, images and Reels featured overt language like "all I care about is being skinny," "skinny is a lifestyle, not a phase," "fat," getting "jacked," and "having no self control." Several of these images and videos depicted users who were outright taunting and shaming other people for their body type or body features. Nearly all content identified in this study related to "skinny" imagery was served to just one of our test Teen Accounts (Emma Rodriguez), and increased in frequency as the study progressed.
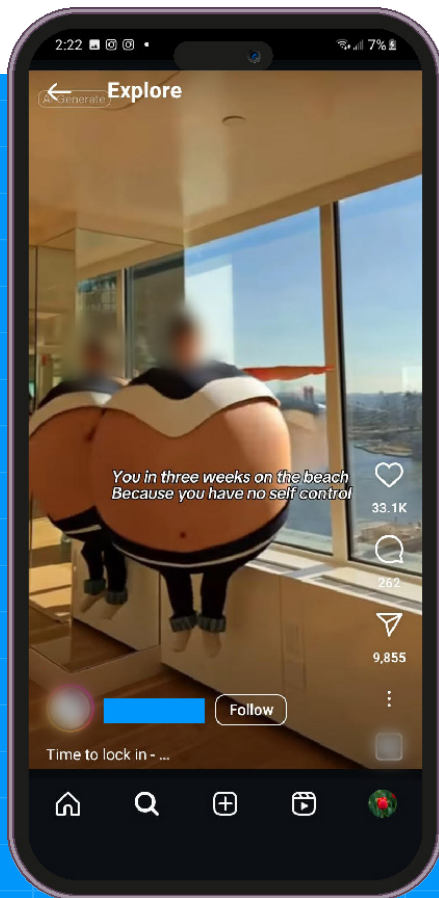
A Reel of a digitally altered woman with her body inflated like a balloon, shaming viewers who have "no self-control," and depicting what they would look like after "three weeks on the beach."

Likes: 33,100
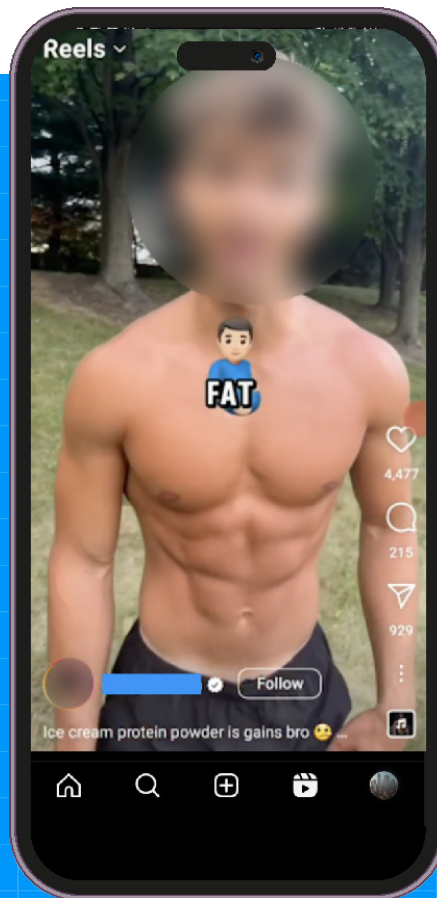
A Reel of a shirtless man shaming others for drinking protein shakes and telling viewers that if they want to get "jacked" (muscular), they should eat meat instead of consuming protein shakes.

Likes: 4,477
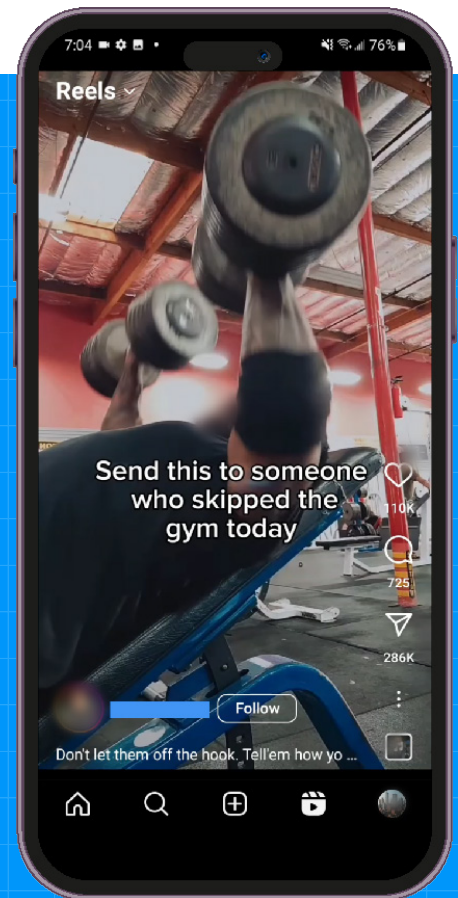
A Reel shaming viewers who did not go to the gym, followed by a clip implying that the viewer is "gay" (as an insult) for not going to the gym.
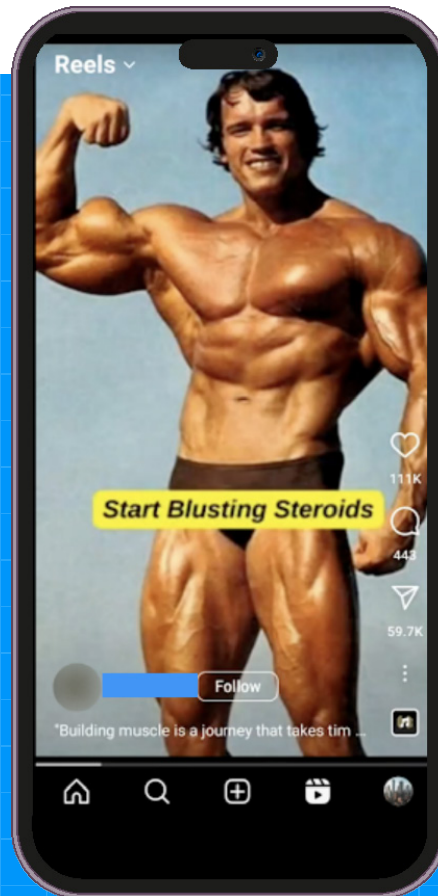
Likes: 110,000

III. Alcohol, steroids, and supplements — Participants received algorithmically recommended content that referenced or pointed directly to products, including alcohol and body-shaping supplements. Users received content depicting other people drinking alcohol, or "getting wasted." Content featuring alcohol occasionally repeated or trended, including the below image referring to "Mike," which appeared both on the feeds of our control test Teen Account (Aiden Morales) and our test Teen Account that represented a 17-year-old boy interested in health supplements (Kai Chen). These accounts also received content that directed the use of steroids, products, or supplements.
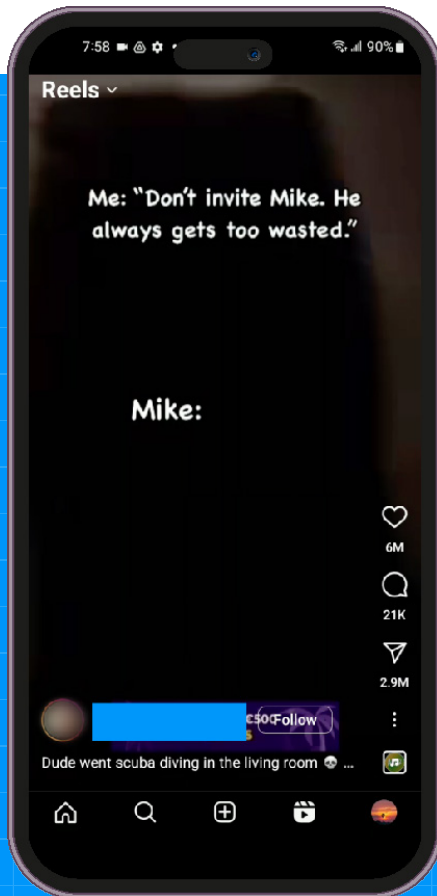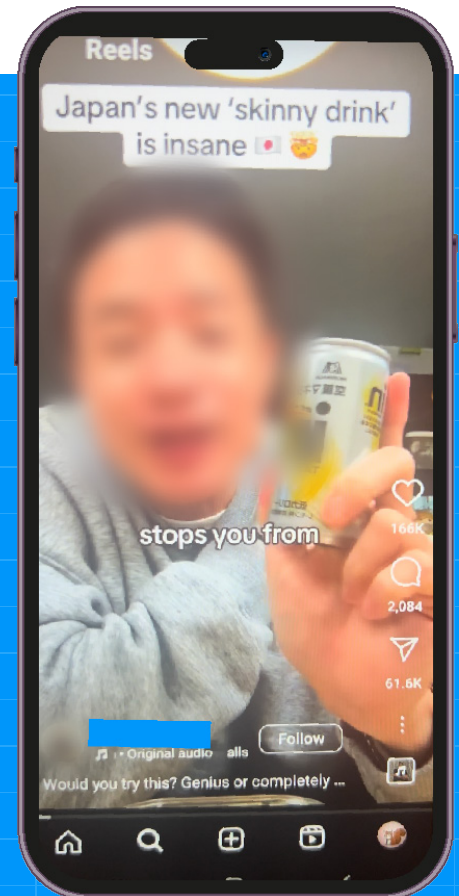

A Reel of a young man jumping and flipping into a table containing a large container of water, describing "Mike" as getting too "wasted" (intoxicated).

Likes: 6,000,000

A Reel of Arnold Schwarzenegger lifting weights with a voiceover of AI-generated audio from Schwarzenegger advocating for using steroids if viewers do not see results from weight lifting.

Likes: 111,000

A Reel from a content creator promoting a Japanese "skinny drink" called Tansan, which has been promoted by creators as an alternative for Ozempic and helps with reducing hunger.

Likes: 166,000

IV. Hateful content — Participants received algorithmically recommended content that was racist, homophobic, and misogynistic. Some reported examples include referring to certain communities as animals or taunting a specific culture through references to racist cultural stereotypes. Content like the video below, "this song getting him canceled," did not present at first as racist, but later used aggressively harmful and racist language. Homophobic behavior was almost as overt, using emojis to express hateful aggression, including in comments.
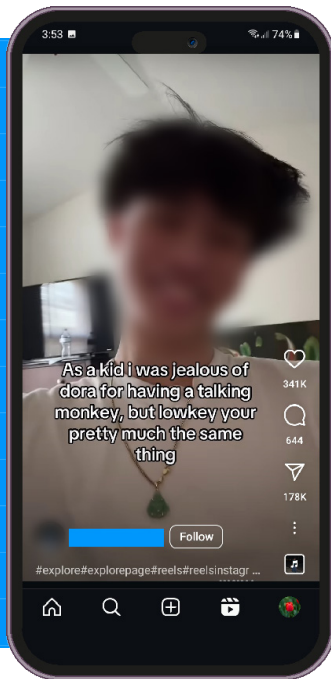

A Reel of a young person referring to Boots from the children's show "Dora" as a talking monkey, and saying the viewer is the same, a reference to a slur used about Black people.
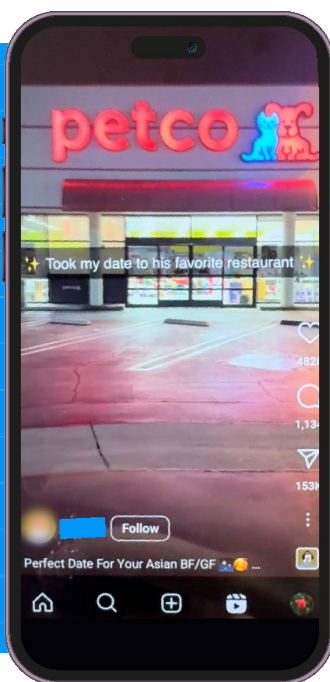
Likes: 341,000
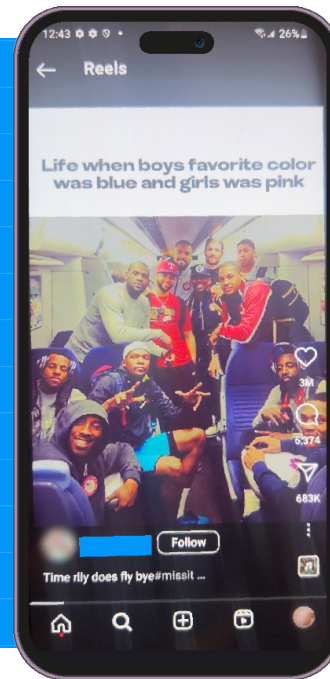
A Reel refers to how things said years ago no longer have the same connotation. The top comment on the video (with 34,441 likes) describes God creating a rainbow and not the pride flag.

Likes: 794,000
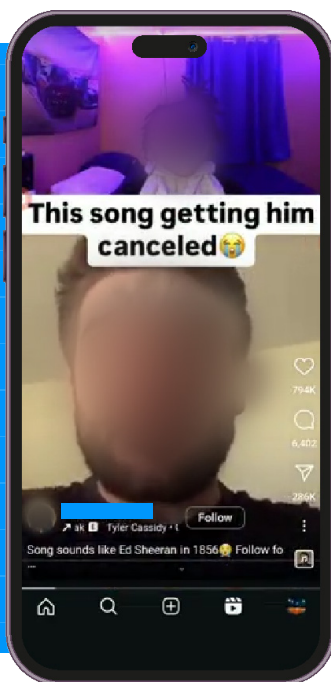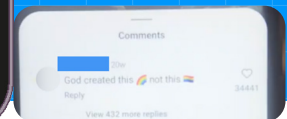
A Reel of a Black man reacting to a white man singing using the n-word, a slur used about Black people.

Likes: 794,000

A Reel of a creator showing an Asian man dressed in traditional clothing outside a Petco, a store for purchasing pets and pet supplies. The caption reads: "took my date to his favorite restaurant," implying that the man eats pets, a common racial stereotype used about Asian people.

Likes: 162,000

V. Disturbing content — Participants received algorithmically recommended content that depicted gun violence, domestic violence, and even representations of female biological processes for overtly sexualized purposes. Such content was flagged by a majority of our participants from our test Teen Accounts.
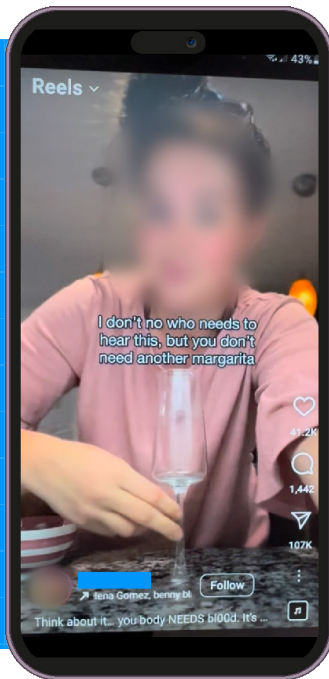

A Reel showing a young woman mixing raw milk and "period blood" instead of drinking a Margarita.

Likes: 41,200
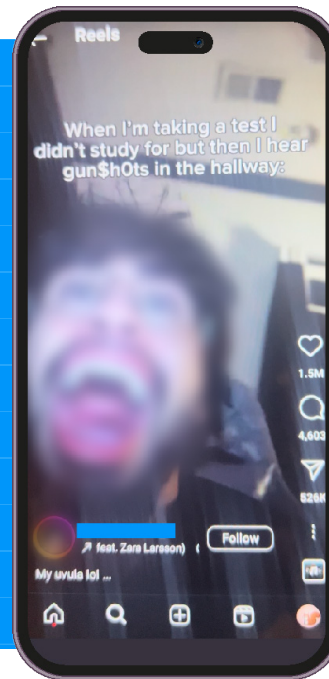
A Reel showing a creator moving towards the door with the caption "When I'm taking a test I didn't study for, but then I hear gunshots in the hallway:" implying that the creator would go towards the gunshots to end his life because he failed to prepare for a test.

Likes: 1,500,000
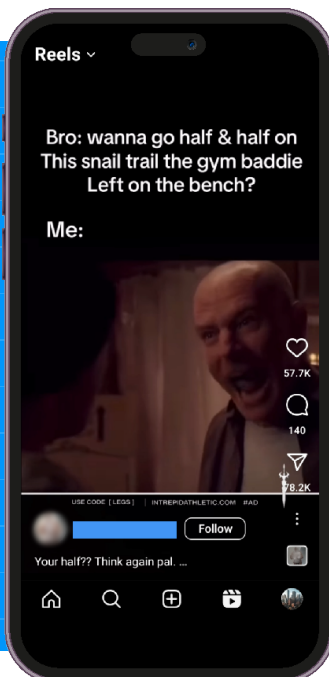
A Reel using a meme format and a clip from a film that reads "Bro: wanna go half & half on this snail trail the gym baddie left on the bench?" implying that the creator would like to not "go half and half" on consuming the snail trail (vaginal lubricant) left by the baddie (an attractive woman).

Likes: 57,700
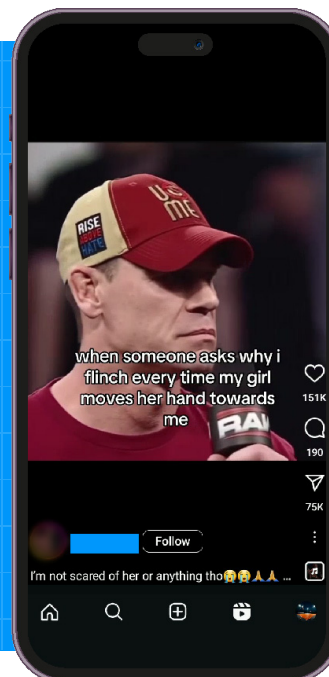
A Reel showing John Cena saying "for 25 years I have been the victim" with the caption "when someone asks why I flinch every time my girl moves her hand towards me" can be construed as content about domestic violence.

Likes: 151,000
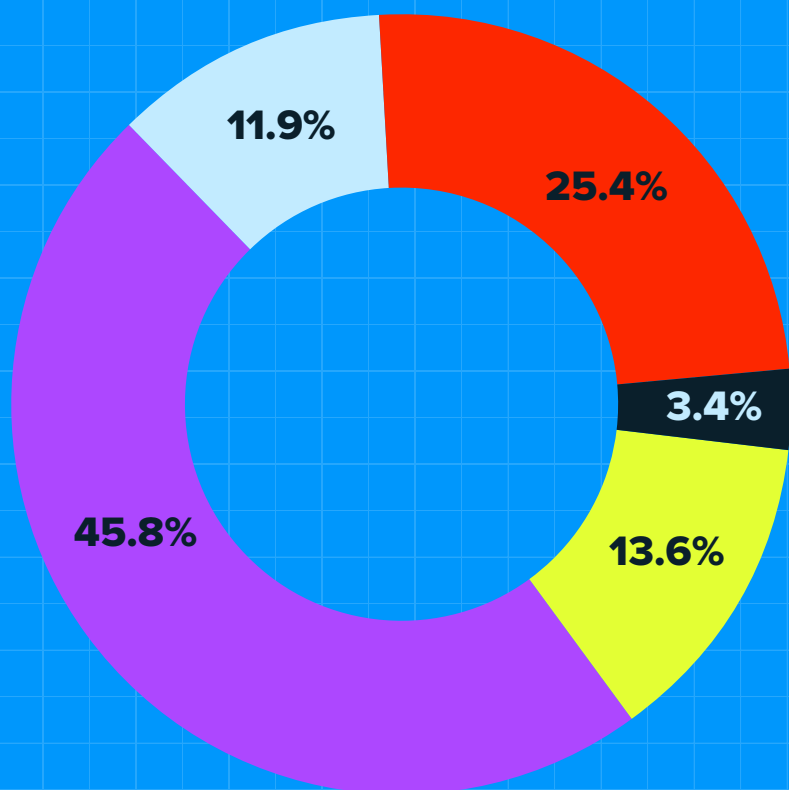
Percentage Classifications of Flagged by Account

25.4%
3.4%
13.6%
45.8%
11.9%

- ✚ Aiden Morales (Control)
- ✚ Emma Rodriguez
- ✚ Kai Chen
- ✚ Ethan Nguyen
- ✚ Lila García

Percentage Classifications of Flagged by Content

22.4%
10.3%
6.9%
5.2%
55.2%

- ✚ Body Image/Disordered Eating
- ✚ Hateful Content
- ✚ Sexual Content
- ✚ Disturbing Content
- ✚ Alcohol, Steroids, and Supplements
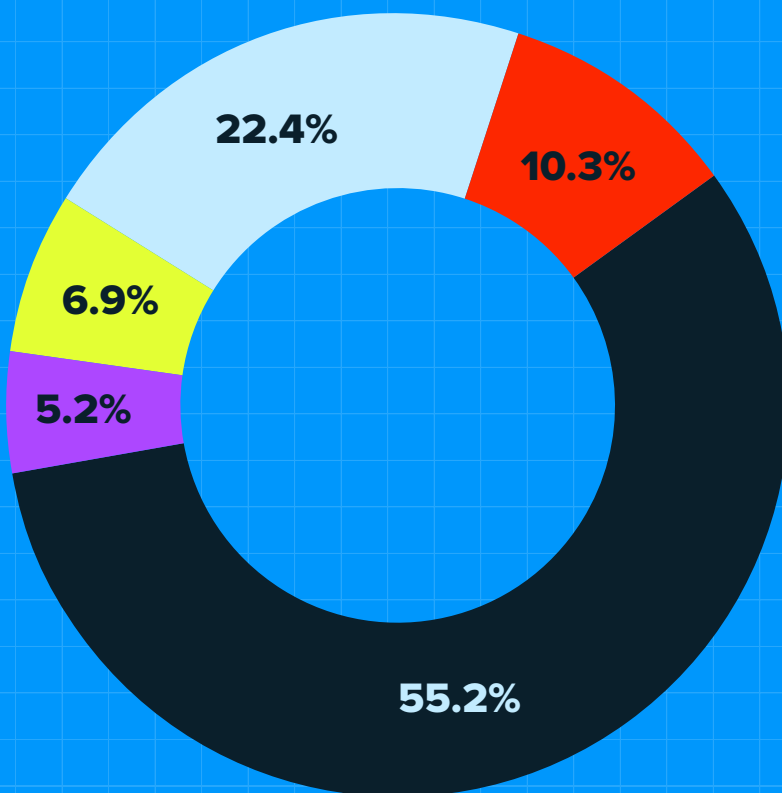
Experiences on Instagram Teen Accounts felt overwhelming and negative. 4 out of 5 research participants had distressing experiences while using Instagram Teen Accounts.

Using daily reporting from our participants, we tracked regular engagement and sentiments to better understand how using Teen Accounts may change day over day. "Distressing experiences" were defined as one day or more when a participant reported a "1" or a "2" on the scale of how using Instagram made them feel that day. While participants reported a range of emotions and experiences throughout the study, participants noted feeling like they often saw more content recommended to Teen Accounts that related to sex or that depicted bodies, health, and fitness using negative framing. Multiple participants notably reported that they received large and overwhelming volumes of specific types of content, particularly related to fitness. Our participants remarked:

"Similar to yesterday, my feed was heavily populated with motivational and fitness influencers. I noticed a recurring trend of these influencers promoting unregulated products or creating user-generated content for brands with what appeared to be multi-level marketing structures. For me it felt almost overwhelming to see the amount of this type of content."

"It was amazing how dense the feed was with fitness content. Definitely was overwhelming. There was a lot of eating videos that promoted eating habits that are quite frankly dangerous for the average teen to even attempt."

"It was weird seeing workout videos right next to videos comparing men and women. The fitness stuff was supposed to be positive, but the gender comparisons felt negative and could be harmful, especially to younger viewers. It made me wonder if the app was doing enough to control what people see."

"The content made me feel uneasy because of the content's use of hooks and imagery to give tips on how to lose weight fast. I know that young kids will often click on the videos because, when I clicked on the comment, many of them had a high school age in their bio."

"I noticed a significant amount of nutrition-related content. And honestly it made me feel uncomfortable and uneasy."

Participants response to: rate how using Instagram for an hour made you feel today
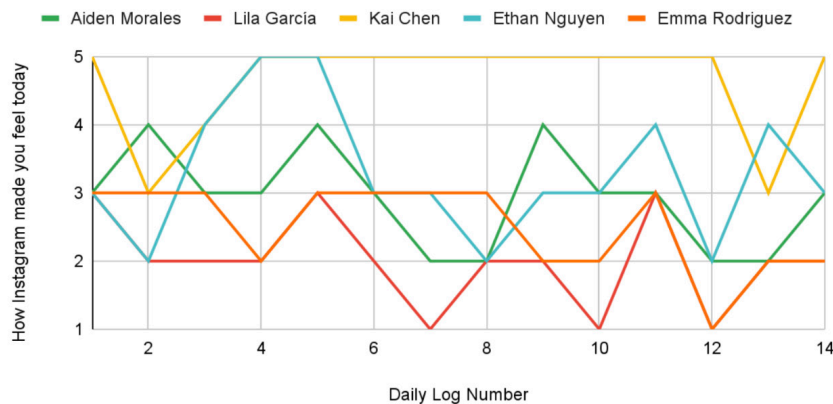
"How Instagram made you feel today":
1 — It made me feel worse about myself;
5 — It made me feel better about myself.

**Instagram's algorithm appeared to test and manipulate Teen Accounts users.**

Many of our participants noticed clear patterns of engagement through their use day over day. Participants reported feeling like Instagram was testing their engagement by algorithmically recommending sensitive or extreme content that did not align with previous interests. A few participants observed that they would receive content in "bursts," particularly after just minimally engaging with content by saving or liking a reel. Reports from our participants examined the patterns they witnessed:

"It was generally typical and somewhat entertaining, though in the typical mindless, de-energizing manner that I sometimes feel on my main account after using Instagram for more than ~20 minutes. I observed that even minimal engagement with certain types of content (saving/unsaving a single phallic-themed Reel) noticeably altered my feed algorithm, quickly increasing the frequency of sexually suggestive content. This suggests the recommendation system is relatively responsive to even brief interactions with more provocative material."

"It was quite extreme — my algorithm before was markedly different from how it is now. After liking a couple of sexually suggestive reels, and in particular pressing the "Interested" button for another, my feed changed dramatically. At the end of the session, ~80% of content in my feed was related to relationships or crude sex jokes. This content generally stayed away from being absolutely explicit or showing directly graphic imagery, but also left very little to the imagination."

Our control test Teen Account reported the highest volume of sexualized content, indicating that the baseline experience on Instagram Teen Accounts may often feature similar content.

Of the reported 35 instances of content that were considered to be sexually explicit, 28 instances were reported by our control test account. In one instance, our control test participant received a series of ten continuous reels that were nearly entirely sexual, disturbing, shaming, or referencing vaping. The participant also identified a separate instance in which they received
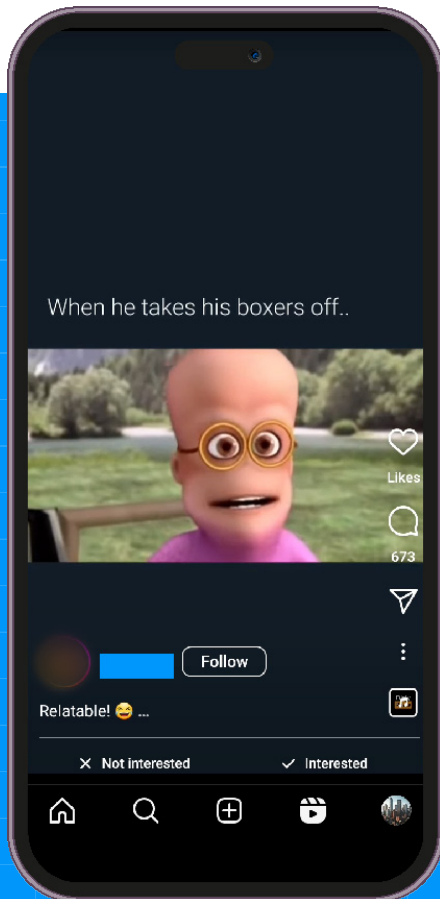
A Reel in a meme format of an animated clip of a character taking off its glasses to stare at something with the caption "when he takes his boxers off," implying what happens when a person views their partner removing his underwear.

Likes: Hidden by the account
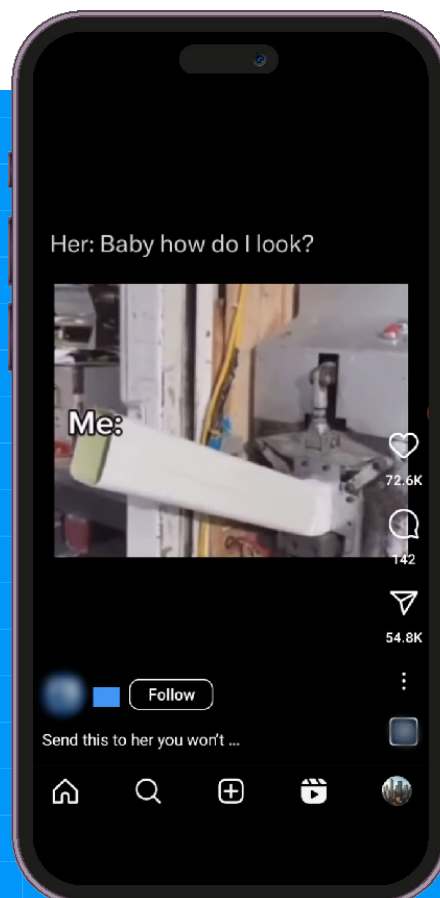
A Reel in a meme format of a machine bending a vinyl water gutter upwards with the caption "Her: Baby, how do I look? Me:" implying an erection.

Likes: 72,600
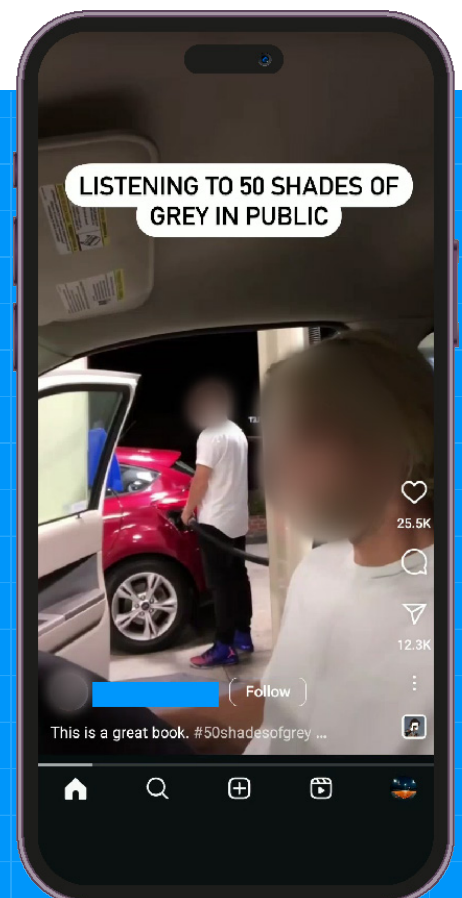
A Reel of a creator playing explicit excerpts of the "50 Shades of Grey" audiobook at a gas station on high volume. The book is known to include graphic depictions of sex.

Likes: 25,500

nearly five continuous minutes of reels that were almost entirely sexual. The videos and images often revealed trends, like "listening to 50 Shades of Grey in public," or using cartoon or anthropomorphic visuals to represent sexual innuendo.

> *Account protection settings were inconsistent, occasionally allowing some of our test accounts to fall through the cracks.* Some of our test Teen Accounts did not receive Meta's default protections. No account received sensitive content controls, while some did not receive protections from offensive comments.

In accordance with the expected user experience intended for Teen Accounts, all of our users reported that their accounts were set to private by default, and that they were not tagged or mentioned in any content. Other tested settings, however, were less consistent. Sensitive content restrictions alone failed 100% of the time.

Setting	Aiden Morales (Control)	Kai Chen	Lila García	Ethan Nguyen	Emma Rodriguez	Did the Teen Accounts setting work?
Did you see offensive comments or messages?	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	**It rarely worked**
Did you see sensitive content?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	**No, it did not work**
Did you receive notifications at night?	No	No	Yes	No	No	**It worked most of the time**
Did you get a reminder to close the app after 60 minutes?	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	**It worked sometimes**

Meta's safety claims versus Teen Accounts' reality

When we asked participants directly, we found overwhelmingly that our test Teen Accounts did not always offer the proper safeguards to younger users, despite Meta's promise of safety and privacy built into their new products. The experience for participants felt remarkably similar to using their own Instagram account as 18-22-year-olds, and some participants even reported that the content began to suit their interests after a while, rather than the interests of the persona our participants were personifying.

Meta affirmed in its press release announcing Teen Accounts that it "removes content that breaks our rules and avoid[s] recommending potentially sensitive content – such as sexually suggestive content." The company goes on to say that "With Instagram Teen Accounts, teens will be placed into the strictest setting of our sensitive content control, so they're even less likely to be recommended sensitive content, and in many cases we hide this content altogether from teens, even if it's shared by someone they follow." Our test Teen Accounts did not receive those protections and were algorithmically recommended sensitive content despite Meta's promises of sensitive content controls.

Instagram press release announcing Teen Accounts	Accountable Tech's research findings on its test Teen Accounts
"We remove content that breaks our rules and avoid recommending potentially sensitive content – such as sexually suggestive content or content discussing suicide or self-harm. With Instagram Teen Accounts, teens will be placed into the strictest setting of our sensitive content control, so they're even less likely to be recommended sensitive content, and in many cases we hide this content altogether from teens, even if it's shared by someone they follow."	+ 5 out of 5 of our test Teen Accounts were algorithmically recommended sensitive content, despite Meta's default sensitive content controls being enabled. + 5 out of 5 of our test Teen Accounts were algorithmically recommended sexual content. + 4 out of 5 of our test Teen Accounts were algorithmically recommended body image and disordered eating content.

Meta touts statistics in an attempt to demonstrate the efficacy of its Teen Accounts, pointing to survey data it hired the firm Ipsos Observer to conduct. Those statistics include:

+ Nearly all US parents of teens surveyed (94%) perceive Instagram Teen Accounts as helpful for parents.

+ Over eight-in-ten parents (85%) believe Instagram Teen Accounts would make it easier for them to help their teens have positive experiences on the platform.

+ Parents overwhelmingly perceive the default protections provided by Teen Accounts as beneficial in supporting their teens.

Such data is limited, however, and does not capture the effectiveness of teen accounts from the perspective of the teen user. Meta's survey asks parents to share their experiences when given a summary about Instagram Teen Accounts, not how the experience has improved safety, privacy, and well-being for their teen. Our research counters their gross summarization of efficacy – it's

one thing for parents to find tools helpful, but it's most important that, in all cases, such tools actually protect teens online. Moreover, a March 27, 2025 update to Meta's public rollout announcement indicated that their enforcement mechanisms "didn't work as well as we'd hoped and inadvertently locked out some parents and guardians who shared devices with their teens." They note that they've removed the age verification measure used to enforce their privacy settings and will test a new approach that would automatically place suspected teens into Teen Account settings. Their update does not provide a timeline or additional details, further illustrating a significant gap in their enforcement despite widespread public claims of the safety and privacy of Teen Accounts.

SUMMARY SCREEN. Please read the brief summary of Instagram Teen Accounts below.

Instagram Teen Accounts are a new experience for teens, guided by parents. Teen Accounts have built-in protections that limit who can contact teens and the content they see, and help ensure teens' time is well-spent.

These protections include default private accounts, restrictions on who can message or interact with teens, restrictions on sensitive content, time limit reminders, and a "sleep mode" that mutes notifications overnight. These default settings are turned on automatically for teens under 18, and teens under 16 need a parent's permission to change any of the settings to be less strict.

4. If you had to choose, do you think Instagram Teen Accounts would make it easier or harder for you to help your teen have positive experiences on Instagram?

Much easier	32%	85%
Somewhat easier	53%	
Somewhat harder	12%	15%
Much harder	3%	

Conclusion

Our research confirms that Instagram Teen Accounts do not always live up to their promise to protect teens online. Meta claims that Teen Accounts would enable and enforce sensitive content controls, preventing Teen Accounts from being algorithmically recommended images and videos that depicted sexual content, body image, and disordered eating content, alcohol related content, content encouraging the purchase of supplements, hateful content, and disturbing content. We hypothesized that when test Teen Accounts follow mainstream accounts related to health and wellness, over a two-week period, Meta would algorithmically recommend sensitive content to our test Teen Accounts, despite its promise of safety in "Teen Accounts." Our two-week study not only confirmed our hypothesis but also found that 5 out of 5 test Teen Accounts still received sensitive content and reported negative experiences. While certain protections were upheld, the experiences our researchers had while using Instagram Teen Accounts did not match the expectations set by Meta. Meta's leadership lauds Teen Accounts as creating "default" age-appropriate experiences on Instagram. Our research suggests otherwise.

Our study provides findings from 5 model accounts meant to represent the typical experience teens would have while using Instagram Teen Accounts. If 5 out of 5, or 100% of our model accounts, were algorithmically recommended sensitive content, it's possible that millions of teen users are also being recommended hateful, sexual, harmful, and disturbing content. This is in direct conflict with the promises made by Meta and has the potential for profoundly harmful effects to entire generations of young people across the world. These findings suggest that Meta has not independently fostered a safe online environment, as it purports to parents and lawmakers, necessitating legislative and regulatory action for true accountability and safer design.

Lawmakers should continue to advance policies that require safety and privacy by design across all social media platforms to better protect young people, including on Meta's products. U.S. state and federal authorities should consider adopting age-appropriate design policies that hold social media companies accountable for their design practices and protect young people online, offering them truly age-appropriate experiences. The onus and responsibility to protect users on platforms like Meta's Instagram must not fall on parents or teens, but on those who design and create the products themselves. In addition, lawmakers should compel Meta to produce data about Teen Accounts so that regulators and nonprofits can understand over time whether teenagers are actually protected when using Instagram.

Limitations

Several limitations constrained the research study. The sample size of the participants was small, similarly aged, used similar devices and operating systems, and were constrained by their availability for only a two-week-long study. Participants were also given loose guidance for how they were to engage with their test Teen Account and the content that appeared in their feeds. Due to the myriad ways a user can engage with an Instagram account, controlling for these interactions was too cumbersome. Additional external factors also could have influenced accounts, including that participants engaged on their home WiFi network, were geolocated to a location similar to their personal account, and a few Gmail accounts required a phone number to set up, meaning a personal phone number was linked to the account. One Instagram account required our team to use an existing phone number to set up the account.

Other potential factors include that the study was not entirely simultaneous; one participant began and concluded after their fellow participants. In addition, whole sessions were not screen recorded due to the volume of content that would be produced, meaning only the content that our participants deemed harmful, disturbing, or obscene was documented. Finally, our test Teen Accounts followed a pre-determined list of 10-20 accounts to examine the particular areas of health and wellness, which may differ from the experience of teens at large.

Acknowledgements

We thank our five research participants, whose contributions were invaluable and made this research possible. All participants were voluntarily involved in the study and willingly exposed themselves to harmful content in an effort to create a safer digital experience for future generations. Our participants all took time out of their busy schedules to dedicate to this research, and we are incredibly grateful for their contributions!

Resources

- A full library of all content collected can be found [here](#).

- Research Assessment data collected and compiled from participants can be found here:

    - [Assessment Response Compilation](#)

    - [Research Assessment - Aiden Morales](#)

    - [Research Assessment - Kai Chen](#)

    - [Research Assessment - Lila García](#)

    - [Research Assessment - Ethan Nguyen](#)

    - [Research Assessment - Emma Rodriguez](#)

- Definitions

    - *Goon (n)* - Well-known slang term in sexual subculture of chronic and compulsive masturbators, used both as a verb and a noun. (Urban Dictionary)

    - *Snail Trail (n)* - The secretions of the vagina. (Urban Dictionary)

    - *Baddie (n)* - Slang term used to reference females. Refers, often sexually, to physical appearance. (Urban Dictionary)

    - *Creampie (n)* - The act of unprotected/uncovered penile ejaculation and insemination inside the vagina. (Urban Dictionary)