

STOP SHARING VIRAL COLLEGE-ACCEPTANCE VIDEOS

Don't make them, don't "like" them, don't pass them on.

By [Zach Gottlieb](#)

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Every year at this time, viral college-acceptance videos start making the rounds, passed along from student to student, parent to parent, racking up views in the tens of millions. The videos—which have expanded their reach from YouTube to TikTok—follow a formula that goes like this: A teenager looks nervous and might even be crying, claiming that she's absolutely, positively certain she won't get in. Next comes a monologue about how she's shaking so much, she can't move or even breathe. Somehow, she manages to log in to the admissions portal and see that the decision is available. There's more freaking out about how she won't get in. Finally, she clicks a button and—OH MY GOD—she got in! Expressions of utter shock and piercing screams ensue. One can spend hours watching thousands of videos like these, and many teens do.

Some people might find these videos harmless or even uplifting, but that has not been my experience, nor does it resemble what I have heard from other teens around the country through my online wellness community, [Talk With Zach](#), where teens have conversations about the issues we're facing. These videos only exacerbate the already over-the-top stress students feel around college admissions, and have felt for some time. In 2014, the American Psychological Association [found](#) that school is a top stressor for teens—and a significant part of school stress is the race for college acceptance. In 2018, a survey by the College Board and *Seventeen* magazine found that [70 percent](#) of high-school students "always" or "often" felt stressed during the college-application process.

You might think that these findings would discourage people from adding to adolescent stress by plastering acceptance videos all over social media and thereby subjecting other teens to watching a party to which they weren't invited. Yet even after the surgeon general [declared](#) a teen-mental-health crisis in 2021, the acceptance video has remained a mainstay of the college-application process—if anything, it has become the culminating ritual.

It's time for people to stop sharing these videos. Stop watching them. Stop liking them. If you are a teen or a teen's parent and you really can't resist recording this moment for posterity, keep it private—this is something for your friends and family, not for the wider world.

Parents shoulder a large part of the blame here. Whether parents are recording the video or hovering on-camera, their presence is felt. It's not uncommon to hear them prodding their worried teenagers to "hurry up" and click on the decision, because even *they* can't handle the anxiety.

One college-decision video that has 10 million views on YouTube and went viral on TikTok exemplifies this dynamic. In it, a Harvard applicant, who's already tearing up before she clicks the button, immediately starts screaming when she sees the acceptance—and so does her mom. Her mom is bawling and shrieking and has an expression of exhausted relief on her face, as if her daughter has been spared a terrible tragedy. It feels like a comedy sketch, a satire of parental overinvestment, but of course this is real. Teenagers are infamous for posting about their lives online, but it's the mother who, through her tears implores: "Take a picture!"

Denise Pope, a co-founder of Challenge Success, a Stanford-affiliated organization that partners with schools to improve student well-being, told me that these videos amplify the already intense anxiety over college admissions. "Many students," she said, "worry about not getting into their top-choice school, not getting in anywhere, or letting their parents down in some way." Instead of putting teens at ease, these exaggerated reactions in acceptance videos "elevate the importance of where someone gets in."

Studies have shown that social-media comparison leads to depression, anxiety, and poor self-esteem, and at a time when teens are feeling especially vulnerable as decisions roll in, their social-media feeds are filling up with these videos. What teens aren't seeing, of course, are the tens of thousands of videos that never make it to social media—ones in which someone clicks on the decision and it's a rejection (unless the string of rejections is followed by a triumphant: "And then I got into Berkeley!" #ItAllWorksOut). When admissions celebrations are public but the disappointments are kept private, kids get the impression that everyone else is getting acceptances, which leaves many of them feeling even more alone—and more unworthy.

Teens can easily forget that college admissions aren't about worth and that there are a million reasons equally impressive applicants have different admission outcomes at the same school. We know admissions officers take into account dozens of factors, including athletics needs, creating a diverse class, majors to be filled, legacy status, and what high school you attend.

But acceptance videos put us into categories of winners and losers. They reinforce the false idea that admissions decisions determine our future, and that we either succeeded or failed at the first 18 years of our lives, depending on what hoodie we get to wear (something many parents buy in advance specifically for the acceptance video).

One article listing "The 5 Best College Acceptance Videos on YouTube" even advises students that "taping your reaction allows you to witness possibly one of the best moments of your life as many times as you would like in the future." This is exactly the idea that is harming students to begin with. I hope my life's "best moments" are far more interesting than this.

When my college decisions come next year, I, too, might scream if I get into a school I'm really excited about, but if I videotape it, I certainly won't post it. It won't be a public event. Not every celebration has to be a full-on production, which is what these videos have started to resemble, especially as they've led to a new kind of viral video, the elaborate post-acceptance college reveal

video, where students use a game-show format to announce which school, of their many acceptances, they've decided to attend.

Our entire college-admissions process has gotten so out of control that even the terminology used—“highly selective colleges” are now commonly referred to as “highly rejective colleges”—is hurting teens and making the process even more demoralizing. Imagine if teens were told instead that we can thrive and challenge ourselves (and, yes, be happy) at many schools—and that college, like anything in life, is what we make of it. We can't magic that culture into existence, but we can stop the worst excesses of the one we have, by refusing to post these acceptance videos, and prioritizing our generation's emotional health.

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