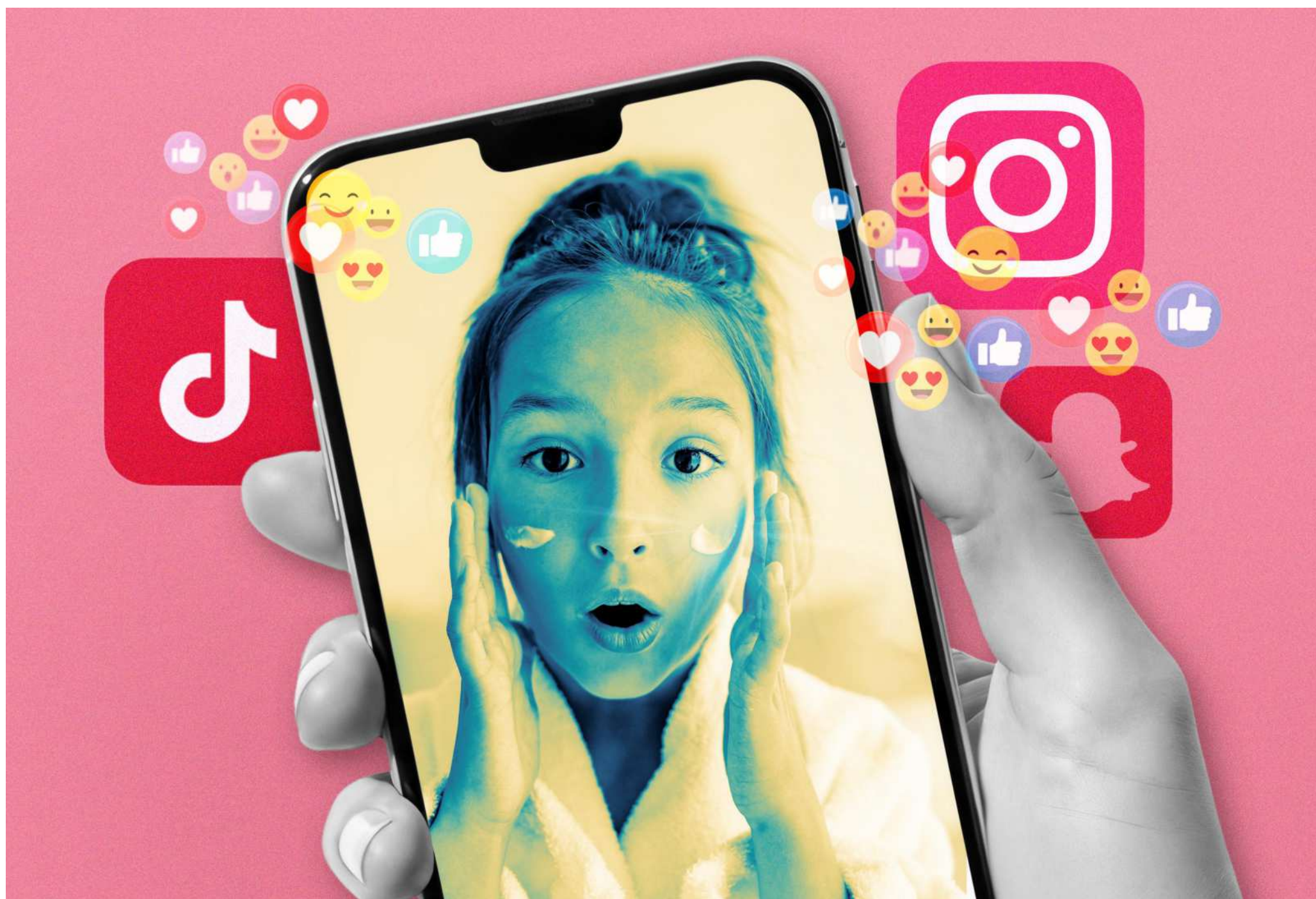


GLOWING PAINS: THE BUSINESS OF TWEEN BEAUTY



Social media algorithms and big brands are preying on children's vulnerabilities as Australian girls spend hundreds on serums, toners and 'glass skin' products



**KRISTIN
SHORTEN**

As Australian teenager Taylor Delle Coste gets ready for school, she casually chats to hundreds of thousands of social media followers about finishing Year 11, hating "sad" Aussie winters, her new manicure and an upcoming swimwear collaboration.

As she speaks, face mist, eye cream, moisturiser, sunscreen, eyebrow pencil, brow gel, powders and setting sprays are applied in quick succession.

The 16-year-old is sharing her beauty routine in a "Get

Ready With Me" video for her 115,000 TikTok followers.

Taylor is one of a growing number of young Australian content creators documenting their lives through skincare, makeup and beauty routines.

The Sydney high school student told The Nightly she started making GRWM videos after being inspired by other teenage creators online.

"I didn't have 'fancy' products or an 'aesthetic' area to film in but I had a dream and I wasn't going to let anyone or anything stop me," she said.

"I think GRWM videos are so popular with young people because they are relatable and fun to watch.

"Young people love to watch other people's routines, see what products are trending and what people are using."

Taylor said she learnt most of what she knows about skincare from TikTok and Instagram.

Across social media, so-called "skinfluencers" perform extravagant, expensive and time-consuming skincare rituals using popular brands such as Glow Recipe, The Ordinary, Naked Sundays, Summer Fridays, Sol de Janeiro and Bubble, whose colourful packaging and playful branding have become instantly recognisable to many

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tweens and teenagers.

The trend has become so widespread that Italian researchers have coined the term “cosmeticorexia” to describe an unhealthy fixation on achieving flawless skin through excessive skincare routines and cosmetic procedures.

According to psychologists and dermatologists, the trend is fuelling an unprecedented obsession with beauty and skincare among Australian tweens and teenagers.

Specialist dermatologist Ritu Gupta says she has seen patients as young as 12 using sophisticated skincare routines.

“They were using things like AHAs, so alpha hydroxy acids, and they’re asking about things like green tea and liquorice, which are all buzzword ingredients,” she said.

“Occasionally I see patients with skin rashes related to the inappropriate use of anti-ageing ingredients in young skin, which is just totally ludicrous, where kids are using things like retinols and alpha hydroxy acids, glycolic acids and that sort of thing.

“They do have some benefits in certain situations, but they’re not for young people.”

Dr Gupta, who regularly treats teenagers with acne in her Sydney clinic, said multiple forces — including brand marketing — were driving the trend.

“Mostly it’s social media, and in fact, now a large part of the acne consultation is dispelling myths,” she said.

“It’s standard practice now for me to say, now ‘are you doing any TikTok skin care, using any beef tallow on your face or taking any protein supplements?’

“There’s so much garbage out there.”

Among the most influential trends is the pursuit of so-called “glass skin” – a Korean beauty ideal characterised by luminous, poreless and seemingly flawless skin.

Dr Gupta says the aesthetic is fundamentally unrealistic.

“I think social media is a big contributor for (promoting) all these filters and this glowing glassy Korean skin, which is really unattainable,” she said.

“Normal skin has pores, normal skin has texture and normal skin in teens will have the odd pimple.

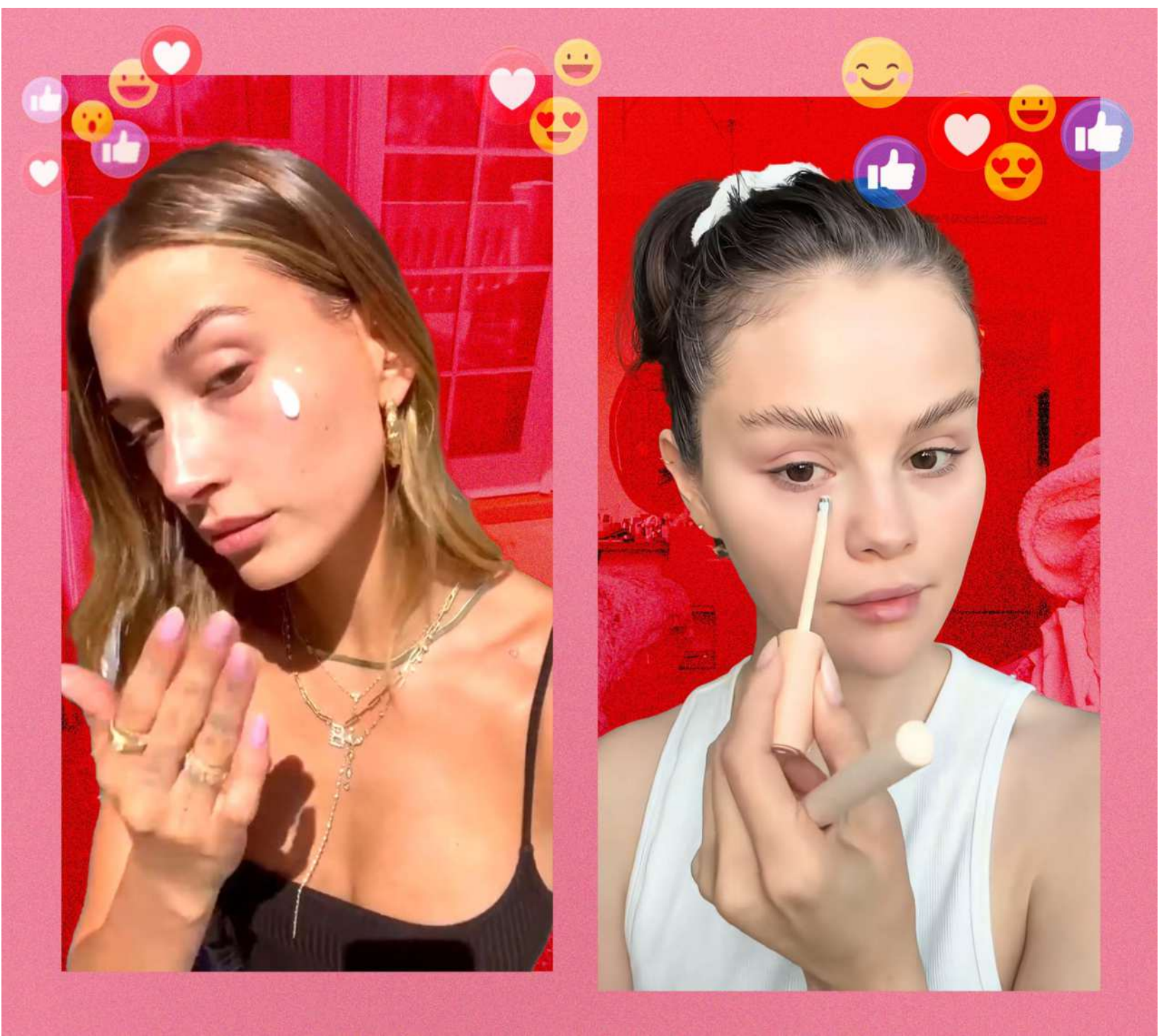
“Glass skin isn’t achievable because it’s not real.”

She warns using adult skincare products on young faces can have serious consequences.

“Best-case scenario is they’re wasting their time and money, but worst case, they can really do some serious damage to their skin barrier, which can then kick off a vicious cycle,” she said.

“The worst-case scenario is they give themselves a facial rash, which then becomes infected and potentially causes scarring.”

But experts say the phenomenon is about far more



than irritated skin and damaged skin barriers.

Veya Seekis, a senior lecturer and researcher at Griffith University’s School of Applied Psychology, believes the psychological consequences are even more alarming.

Dr Seekis researches body image, appearance-focused social media and the factors that shape self-esteem among young people.

“I think the main culprit is social media, because that’s what spreads these messages very quickly,” she said.

“And brands also have a responsibility in all of this.

“They certainly don’t do anything to say, ‘Hey, this product is not for young skin.’”

She believes beauty companies have become increasingly effective at cultivating young consumers

through social media trends, influencer partnerships and celebrity-backed brands.

“For a long time Drunk Elephant was this brand that was making a lot of noise on social media, so it doesn’t take much (to seduce young consumers),” she said.

“The brands also reach out to content creators and say, ‘hey, we want to partner up with you, so that you can endorse our products’, and so it just compounds.

“And then you have celebrity skin care creators like Hailey Bieber and Selena Gomez, who are very relatable to the young audiences who look up to them.”

Dr Seekis said the explosion of beauty content accelerated during the pandemic with terms such as Snapchat dysmorphia and Zoom dysmorphia emerging.

“It just started to promote appearance self-care to a young audience that just absolutely doesn’t need it,” she said.

“Anything that specifically endorses a beauty ideal at a young age has repercussions when they get older.

“It begins to distort the way that they view themselves in comparison to the ideal that’s being presented to them constantly.”

Taylor said she recognised those pressures firsthand.

“I absolutely feel pressured to have glass skin as that is the majority of what I see online,” she said.

“I personally have acne myself and especially when I have just broken out or my acne is at its worst, I can get pretty insecure about it because I just want clear skin like the people I see online.”

A review of popular Australian teen creators’ accounts found that while some skincare content is explicit influencer marketing, others seem more like teen diary entries delivered while applying products.

In one video, influencer Charli Lea, who has almost 200,000 Instagram followers, discusses looming school tests and the end of the holidays while completing a bedtime skincare routine involving at least eight products.

In another recent reel, Gold Coast content creator Dakota Boyd films from her bedroom, dressed in silky pyjamas, while experimenting with a new makeup technique she has seen online.

Throughout the clip, she holds products up to the camera and talks viewers through each step of the routine — applying foundation, bronzer, blush, concealer and eyeshadow — while discussing brushes, application methods and the tutorial she is attempting to follow.

In another clip, Dakota enthusiastically reviews a cleanser she says was sent to her by beauty brand Byoma and Portobello PR.

Holding the brightly coloured bottle up to the camera, she demonstrates the product and



Celebrity skin care creators like Hailey Bieber and Selena Gomez ... are very relatable to the young audiences who look up to them

Dr Veya Seekis

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praises ingredients including ceramides and hyaluronic acid. “My skin feels so soft and clean,” she tells her young followers. “OK, now I get the hype around this product.”

Gold Coast teenager Lilah Marie follows a similar formula. In one video, Lilah prepares for a day trip to Brisbane while discussing work commitments, assignments and concerns about her hair falling out. In another, she talks about school subjects, an infected ear piercing and whether a banana was enough for breakfast while completing a lengthy beauty routine.

Dr Seekis said she had seen beauty content being produced by children as young as eight and warned the trend was placing adult-like pressures on children who should be focused on family, friendships and childhood experiences.

She also warned that constant exposure to idealised beauty content could encourage children to fixate on flaws that either do not exist or are completely normal.

“If they become preoccupied with their skin and they’re constantly looking at it in the



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Dr Ritu Gupta

mirror, they will start to see things about their skin and their features that they think no longer meet those unrelenting standards, and they’ll try to find ways to fix those,” she said.

“They might start to delve into ingredients that are not suitable for their skin, and they might start to think, ‘certain features of my face need fixing’.

“They might then move towards those cosmetic procedures and that kind of content, so you can see where this can very easily lead.”

She said parents should watch for children spending excessive time getting ready, accumulating large numbers of products or constantly wanting

new products before finishing the ones they already own as those behaviours might indicate a child is using skincare to manage deeper feelings of anxiety, insecurity or dissatisfaction with their appearance.

“There’s nothing wrong with engaging in skincare routines. There’s nothing wrong with beauty content on social media,” Dr Seekis said.

“But when it becomes a big part of one’s self-worth, then we start to see dysmorphic disorders, anxiety and shame, and comparisons really escalate, which is where the problems begin to arise.”

Taylor, who is represented by

a talent agency, agreed social media had fundamentally changed the way teenagers viewed their appearance.

She said beauty content exposed young people to unrealistic standards at increasingly younger ages and often left them feeling pressured to look a certain way.

“I feel as if there is so much pressure towards young people to always look their best,” she said.

Dr Seekis says the answer is not banning skin care altogether.

“It’s not easy, because you don’t want to take away some fun aspects of it,” she said.

“But I think it’s important to

just have that conversation with your child and say that it’s OK to have a skincare routine, this is all part of self-care, but these are the things that are really suitable for you.”

Dr Gupta agrees it can be positive to teach children good skincare habits.

But if a 10-year-old — without any specific skin concerns — walked into her clinic tomorrow, her advice would be to use a gentle cleanser, sunscreen and, if needed, a basic moisturiser.

Dr Seekis said parents should discuss why influencers promote products and help children understand the commercial forces operating behind the scenes.

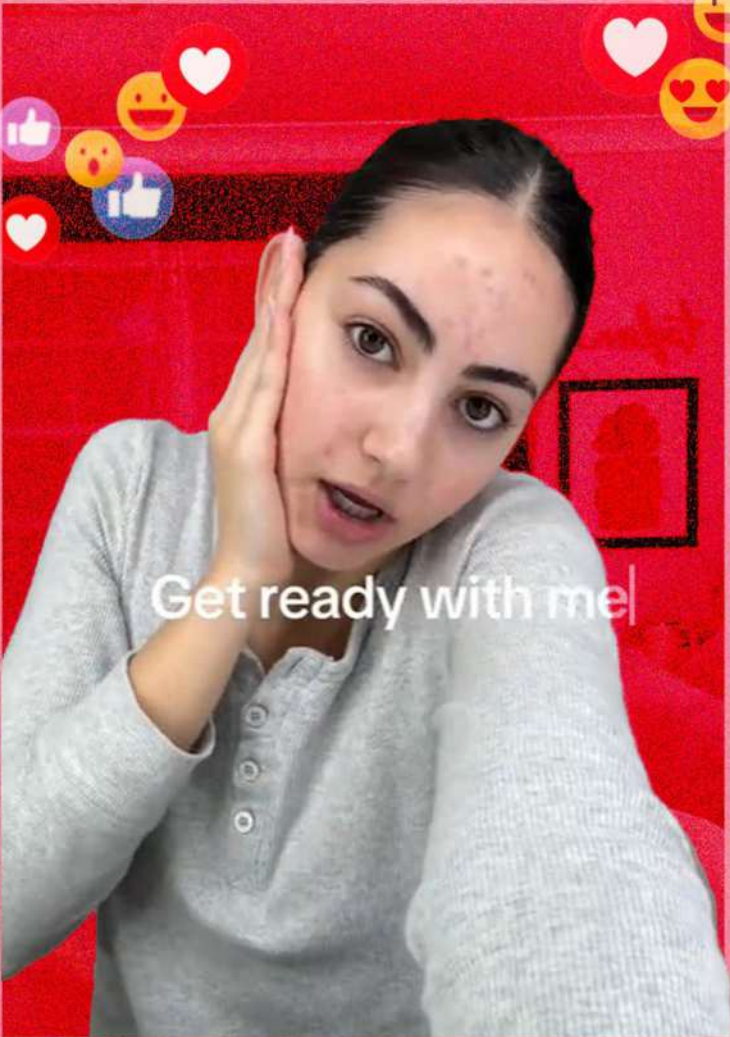
“It’s all about just creating some literacy around the content that they’re consuming,” she said.

Because while skincare can be fun, she warns many young people are being sold an impossible ideal.

“It comes from the repetition of seeing skin that is just so perfect in every way,” she said.

“When you see young people with 10 step skincare plans, you know we’ve got a little bit of a problem here.

“No one needs 10 steps.”



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