



THE IMPACT OF INSTAGRAM ON TEEN BODY IMAGE

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Children have easy access to the internet. As computers, tablets, and cell phones become more ubiquitous, children often browse the internet and use social media to the point of addiction. The time spent on social media only increases as children become teenagers. Typical content on the internet includes celebrities and models with glamorous body types and admirable fashion sense. They share their daily lives, workout routines, and eating habits, influencing teenagers' impressions of aspects that society considers appealing, though much is focused on body types.

Body image is important to teenagers and their self-esteem. However, teenagers spend significant time viewing a plethora of unrealistic body ideals on social media. This can cause them to develop a negative self-image, harming their mental health. While social media sites such as Instagram encourage users to share images and videos of their daily lives with their audience, it can negatively impact teenagers' body image and self-esteem.

What is body image?

Body image is what an individual thinks and feels about their own body. Someone may feel positive or negative views about their own body, whether influenced by internal or external factors. There are four aspects of body image: perceptual body image, affective body image, cognitive body image, and behavioral body image. *Perceptual body image* is how you see your body that might not always be a correct representation of your appearance. *Affective body image* is how you feel about your body, such as being satisfied or dissatisfied with your body shape, weight, or a specific part. *Cognitive body image* is how you think about your body, which can lead to being obsessed with your body shape and weight. Lastly, *behavioral body image* is how you act based on the result of your body image. For example, if someone is dissatisfied with their body image, they might starve themselves to change their appearance to what they think looks better.

What is Instagram?

Instagram is a social media platform where people upload photos. One can either upload them on their profile for 24 hours or post them, which can be kept or taken down at the user's option. There are also many filters to use that can reshape a person's face or make their skin look smoother than it is. It is a popular platform for people to connect with others worldwide. To follow a person on Instagram means to see whatever another person posts on their stories and possibly talk to them. You can message and call on the site, which is what teens say makes it popular among their age group (McDonald, 2023). Most teens say that they love posting photos, finding interesting photos, and communicating with their friends through chats (McDonald, 2023).

Influence of Instagram

Social media is popular among teenagers, who spend much time on these platforms, especially Instagram. This site provides entertainment as well as communication with others. However, Instagram can harm them. The site shares photos of models, celebrities, and others who may use beauty filters that can change how they look better and those who share the best versions of themselves. In a teenager's mind, these bodies can become the standard they set for themselves, which usually is not practicably attainable.

As the teenage brain continues to develop, teens feel strong emotions they cannot control and act out. Therefore, many teens sometimes take drastic actions to achieve an idealized body type and develop mental health issues such as eating disorders.

Reactions to Instagram

A survey by The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) indicated that teenagers like Instagram because they can share, communicate, and follow others (McDonald, 2023). Though it seems like a fun site for teenagers, it has also harmed them. For example, 17-year-old Anastasia Vlasov needed therapy after using Instagram after she developed an eating disorder (Wells et al., 2021). "When I went on Instagram, all I saw were images of chiseled bodies, perfect abs, and women doing 100 burpees in 10 minutes" (Wells et al., 2021). A 2020 study showed that 32% of young teenage girls had developed a negative body image from using Instagram (Perrigo, 2021). While Instagram provides teenagers with entertainment, it significantly negatively impacts their body image.

Growth of Teenagers' Brains

During early adolescence, the brain stops growing in size but does not stop developing until they are in their mid to late 20s. The prefrontal cortex, behind the forehead, is the last part of the brain that matures. The cortex controls planning, prioritizing, and decision-making skills.

As the prefrontal cortex continues to develop, teenagers are more likely to take more risks without thinking much about the consequences. Whether it is a dangerous or beneficial decision, teens ignore the outcome as they focus more on relationships and social experiences with their peers. Since their brains are still maturing, adolescents react to stress differently than adults. Teenagers have an increased chance of acquiring mental illnesses because not only do their brains change, but their physical, emotional, and social behaviors also change.

Maturity, Mood Changes, and Sensitivity

Teenagers are more emotionally unstable as their brains evolve. They focus on their feelings and make decisions based on their emotions. The content learned from the media influences their decisions between right and wrong. They absorb information from their experiences and social media exposure, such as Instagram. Instagram exposes teens to ideal and unrealistic body images. These images create a false representation of an ideal body in teenagers' minds and cause them to become insecure about their bodies and themselves.

Why We Should Pay Extra Attention

Adolescence “is a vulnerable period for the development of body image issues, eating disorders, and mental illness” (“*Social media and self-esteem: D'amore mental health*,” 2023). Social media plays a significant role in adolescents' lives, thereby being instrumental in creating body image. To illustrate, 94% of all teens in developed countries use social media such as Instagram for about six to eight hours daily (“*Social media and self-esteem: D'amore mental health*,” 2023).

Because teenagers are on their phones so much and are easily influenced by the media, controlling their time online would be significant. If an individual's confidence in their body is hindered, they could develop insecurities that can cause mental health issues. This can become a

big problem as it could interfere with their daily lives and could also show poor performance during school.

Unrealistic Beauty Standards

As Instagram showcases many images and photos that include influential celebrities and models, this can lead to the internalization of body ideals in adolescents, creating unrealistic or unattainable ideas of how their bodies should look. Moreover, Instagram photos often use editing applications or filters that can portray appearances that are unrealistic and difficult to obtain. This creates a gap between how Instagram users look in real life versus what they believe they should look like. Moreover, this is not entirely a female issue; a student shared in a *New York Times* article, "Men also tend to draw a connection between their physical attributes, such as height or muscular strength, directly to personal traits about themselves and other men. For example, a taller man with larger muscles is seen as more powerful and dominant, while a shorter man is regarded in an opposite manner." The ideal body image that Instagram sets for adolescents can create insecurities for those who feel they do not meet those standards.

Instagram Exacerbates Mental Health Problems

Being unhappy with one's body image and weight can lead to mental health problems such as eating disorders, depression, anxiety, and others. Instagram can encourage young adolescents to strive for an impractical self-image, which can cause them to attempt radical diets, over-exercise, or even starve. A woman shared her experiences with Instagram *influencers* - people with large audiences who produce content that makes recommendations that become trends: "Influencers share their 'what I eat in a day' videos, and while their intentions may not be malicious, comparison truly becomes the thief of joy. You start wondering about how much you should be eating. Are you over-consuming? Are you eating too much sugar? Should you be

eating after eight pm? Is this cookie worth it when, like they say, 'summer is just around the corner?'" (Network, 2022, p.1) This can harm not only their body image but also their confidence. If an individual carries a physical trait that cannot be changed, such as height, the body image of being tall may not be achievable for them. Once they find out that it is not achievable, it can harm their mental health.

Body Image Concern and Eating Disorders (ED)

The content that teenagers see on sites such as Instagram may cause them to think that unusual diets or long periods of exercising are normal, especially when what is promoted is the ideal of thin, fit bodies. If the thought of needing a thinner body constantly engages teens' minds, it can influence them to starve themselves to become slimmer like the people they see on Instagram. This can lead to an *eating disorder*, a brain-based illness that interferes with normal eating patterns and can be severe and life-threatening. *Anorexia* is an eating disorder whereby individuals fear gaining weight or becoming obese. People who struggle with this disorder obsess over their weight and the amount of food that they eat, which causes them to go on a strict diet.

Ways to Overcome Instagram's Influence

There are two crucial ways to prevent adopting extreme habits to achieve idealized bodies presented on social media sites such as Instagram. First, the amount of time spent on Instagram should be minimized. The less "perfect" bodies are seen, the less obsession is created for them. Second, spending time taking care of oneself can help with acceptance and self-love. Society's beauty standards constantly change throughout the years. For example, Marilyn Monroe was an ideal beauty in the 1940s and 1950s, but she would be considered overweight compared to today's beauty standards. So what one thinks might not fit the standard now but may

become the standard in the future. Understanding one's body image in perspective can help to develop self-acceptance.

Conclusion

As the teenage brain continues to develop, it is crucial that they are vigilant about maintaining mental health. However, Instagram can interfere with this, causing adolescents to become less self-confident and develop mental health issues. Because they are surrounded by much content regarding unrealistic beauty standards and body types, teenagers can easily be influenced by this and question their appearances. To overcome this, an individual can decrease their time on Instagram and other similar media. The less they are on these sites, the less they are surrounded by an idealized beauty standard. Then have more time to practice self-love and self-acceptance and contemplate that standards are constantly changing and nothing is permanent.

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