

Social Media: Misogyny's #1 Fan

Online influencer Eloise Mason was only 16 years old when her Instagram following nearly doubled in a matter of months. It was the kind of attention many her age would die for; envied her for. The sudden audience that filled her comment sections with flattery quickly became a drug as addictive as any other—but ever drug has its side effects.

Nearly five years later, Mason is adamant that the spotlight was not as positive as she'd once thought. To prove her point, she pulls up her TikTok account on her phone. The account now boasts nearly 115,000 followers. "The moment I focused my social media on my appearance, I had an audience." It exhilarated Mason at the time, motivating her to gain as many followers (and their validation) as possible. "I was 16 and there were so many grown men in my inbox. It made me believe that I was only worth something if they said I was." If she could go back and change anything about her experience, she would wait to join any social media until she became an adult.

Perhaps the most daunting thing about social media is how unavoidable it can feel. Anyone with a cell phone nowadays—which, let's be honest, is almost everyone—has access to a growing list of social media platforms, each providing a different dopamine rush and endless opportunities for their users. On the same app, users can learn to cook, plan a holiday and even make friends in any time zone. The success of social media only seems to be speeding up: TikTok has over 1 billion users using the app every month, and Instagram isn't far behind.

However, if Mason's experience is anything to go by, some facets of social media are far from positive. One study from the CDC shows that the suicide rate for teen girls in the 2010s was the highest it had been since the early 1970s. Worse, the incline was far from linear. From 2007 to 2015, the number was twice as high compared to the decade before. This is no coincidence. "Many girls have access to social media as young as 12 or 13," says social media expert Emma Carr. "Because beauty is so marketable...those young girls will be surrounded by it the moment they open an account." What's more, Carr explains, is that the beauty which all but *drowns* the socially active is almost never authentic. It's strategically crafted, planned, and edited. Young people constantly compare themselves to these images, yearning for a life and a look that isn't theirs without realising that it's not *anyone's*.

Most young women have already been warned about this, though. They've learned about photoshop and stranger danger. While spreading awareness can help, it's no match for the internet's monopoly on the young mind and will rarely prevent their participation. It's also not addressing the root of the problem. Instead of simply telling young girls to 'appreciate their inner beauty' and shaming the internet's obsession with looks, dig a little further. *Why* is beauty so marketable? Why do so many companies use striking faces to sell their products online, and why is it working so well? Why is it that the most popular creators on Instagram and Facebook are coveted for their features and figures?

The answer lies in the patriarchy. Too often, we assume that gender inequality is an issue of the past, with only minor improvements to be made. Feminism isn't a box that was ticked as soon as women were given the right to vote or receive an education. While the focus of gender equality has shifted greatly since the twentieth century, we're far from the finish line. Social media's objectifying gaze is one of the hurdles to defeat before reaching it.

Take Instagram, for example. If you've accessed the app recently, you'll probably be able to come up with a good list of users with impressive followings. Now, separate the creators by gender. How many of the women you listed produce content that mainly focuses on their bodies? How many of the men on your list do the same? Of course, many men make a great profit online because they're attractive, and there are women who have wild success as influencers without ever focusing on their appearance. Nevertheless, it's clear that men do not remotely experience the same level of pressure from society to sexualise themselves that women often do.

One particular study from the University of Bonn is proof of this very statement. A team of academics analysed over 900 people and found that self-sexualisation was only consistently found in female participants. They also found that the majority of the women reported feeling satisfied by posting 'sexy' pictures of themselves in a way they didn't by posting other types of photos. Almost none of the male participants reported feeling this satisfaction at all.

Social media has told countless women that their value solely lies in their appearance. It's taught them that the amount of validation they receive online equals their worth as an individual; determines their place in modern society. Because these platforms only exist two-dimensionally, without real substance and depth; what you see is what you get.

Even more dangerous than that is how contagious this two-dimensional perspective is. If appearance is everything to us online, it begins to matter even more in reality. Soon enough, our individualism loses its importance. Our talents, quirks, and unique characteristics—the traits that matter—don't feed our self-esteem. Our bodies do. All that *really* counts is how well we meet the rapidly-changing criteria we're told to care about.

After coming to terms with the negativity social media was adding to her life, psychology student Abigail Maxwell decided to step away from it for a month. Not only was her self-confidence taking a major hit, but she'd find herself scrolling through the likes of TikTok and Instagram for hours on end. "I wasn't focusing on my studies, my mental health... what really mattered," Maxwell says. "I was sick of how low [social media] made me feel."

Commitments to abstinence like Maxwell's are always easier said than done. The first week of the detox was the toughest, because it restricted her brain from such a habitual source of dopamine. It's not like deleting social media apps automatically took away the habit of going to open them, either. She argued with herself daily, wanting to go back to her old routine and distract herself from responsibility in the online quicksand.

Despite the challenges, though, Maxwell persevered, finding that the following weeks were much easier than the first. "Once I forced myself to focus on other things and occupy myself in better ways... the habit was gone." It's clear that this feat is one she holds with rightful pride. Over a year after her social media detox, Maxwell says she only scrolls through social media for a few minutes each day, and even sometimes goes weeks without it at all. Out of sight, out of mind. "I'm so much kinder to myself," she affirms. Without the demanding pressure to meet anyone else's expectations, there's finally room for her own.

