

ADDRESSING SOCIAL MEDIA'S IMPACT ON ADOLESCENT BODY IMAGE AND SELF ESTEEM

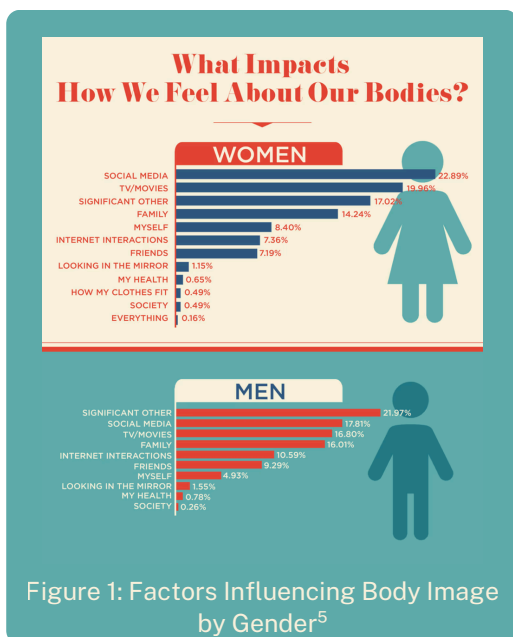
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INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a central part of the daily lives of adolescents, and it is a powerful influence on how they perceive their bodies and appearances. Platforms, such as TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat, regularly expose young users to images and videos that reflect idealized and oftentimes unrealistic standards of appearance. This media is frequently edited and altered by filters, shaping what adolescents view and believe to be normal and desirable.

The youth are a particularly vulnerable group to this phenomenon because they are at a stage in development which emphasizes identity formation and peer acceptance. Many young people engage with content emphasizing attractiveness, fitness, or beauty, and may measure their own self worth against what they are viewing online. Features such as likes, comments, and follower counts only reinforce this looks based validation.

Furthermore, it has been revealed that frequent exposure to this appearance based content is associated with increased body dissatisfaction and lower self esteem among adolescents. These behaviors, in which individuals are comparing themselves to others, are common across social media and have been linked to negative emotional outcomes. Despite most existing research being female focused, both male and female users are affected by these issues, making it an extremely prevalent and pressing issue in society today.



This infographic shows the main internal and external factors that influence body image among both men and women. It highlights shared pressures, as well as key differences between the two genders.

Given the widespread and growing use of social media among youth, concerns about its effects on body image have become increasingly important. Understanding how these platforms contribute to body dissatisfaction and self esteem issues is critical for addressing adolescent wellbeing.

By analyzing the current effects that social media has on the body image and self esteem of adolescents, this report seeks to provide insight on how developing and implementing digital and media literacy curricula in schools, prioritizing user health and safety in the development of social media services, and establishing online tools that foster safe and healthy online environments for the youth can help mitigate harmful effects and support healthier self esteem and body image development.

CURRENT ISSUES WITH SOCIAL MEDIA AND BODY IMAGE AMONG ADOLESCENTS

Social media platforms have quickly become a key part of adolescents' lives, with the vast majority of teenagers using at least one platform, like TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat, daily. Research from the US Surgeon General reports that approximately 95% of adolescents use social media, with many spending hours each day engaging with online content². This widespread use means that exposure to online images and videos is constant for youth.

A major issue with social media is the repeated exposure to idealized and often unrealistic body standards. The media shared on these platforms are frequently altered through filters, editing tools, and even carefully curated presentation. This can easily change physical appearance and present unrealistic body standards. Research from pediatric health sources explains that adolescents are being constantly exposed to content which emphasizes appearance, fitness, and attractiveness in ways that do not reflect everyday reality³. As a result, many young users may begin to view these altered images as normal or even expected.

This issue is only intensified by many features that are built into social media platforms, such as likes, comments, and follower counts. These features may encourage comparison and can link self worth with online feedback. The Surgeon General report notes that heavy social media use, particularly over three hours each day, is associated with risks of mental health concerns. This includes anxiety and depression, conditions which are often connected to body dissatisfaction².

However, researchers also note that the relationship between body image and social media is complex and can vary depending on the way in which platforms are used. Different types of content, levels of engagement, as well as individual factors can all influence how a person may be affected².

Despite this complexity, there is widespread agreement that the constant exposure to appearance based content creates an online environment where comparison is regular and difficult to avoid.

PAST AND CURRENT EFFORTS ADDRESSING SOCIAL MEDIA AND BODY IMAGE

At the school and education level, efforts have included the development of digital literacy and media awareness programs. These programs focus on helping adolescents recognize how online content is made, including the use of filters and editing tools which may not reflect true appearance standards. The American of Pediatrics notes that adolescents are particularly sensitive to appearance based feedback because of developmental and social factors, which makes education on media extremely important³.

Furthermore, at the behavioral level, researchers have examined patterns of social media use, and their relationship to body image outcomes. Studies indicate that increased exposure to appearance focused content is actually associated with greater body dissatisfaction, while different usage and patterns are linked to varying psychological effects².

However, findings have shown that the relationship is not the same for all users, as both individual factors and different types of engagement have an influence on outcomes. The NBCC identifies social comparison as a key psychological factor underlying these effects⁴.

In addition to this, at the platform level, research and public health discussions have begun to focus on how content exposure is influenced by algorithm driven system. The Surgeon General's advisory specifically highlights how recommendation systems may actually increase users' exposure to appearance focused media by prioritizing content that is highly engaging¹.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS SOCIAL MEDIA'S IMPACT ON ADOLESCENT BODY IMAGE

Digital and Media Literacy

One of the most widely proposed solutions to the negative effects of social media on adolescent body image is the development and expansion of digital and media literacy education within schools. These programs are designed to teach students how to evaluate the content that they see online, including identifying filters and editing tools that contribute to pushing unrealistic appearance standards. The US Surgeon General notes that increasing media literacy is a key factor in protecting students and reducing harm caused by social media, as it helps adolescents to gain a better understanding of how online environments are designed intentionally to influence self perception and behavior¹.

In addition, helping teenagers to recognize this altered content supports healthier self esteem development among them³. Implementing these programs more consistently across all schools could help to foster a positive relationship between adolescents and the content they are consuming.

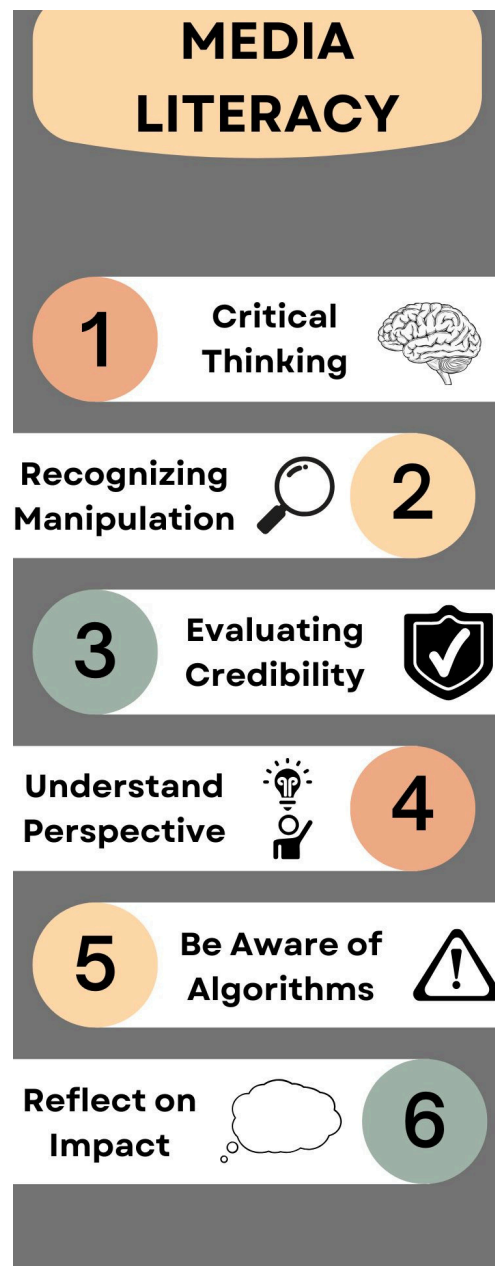


Figure 2: Media Literacy Examples

Change the Design of Social Media Platforms

Another important solution involves changing the design of social media platforms in order to reduce exposure to potentially harmful content. Research notes that repeated exposure to idealized appearance content is largely associated with increased body dissatisfaction, particularly for adolescents¹. Because of this, it may be important for platforms to limit the promotion of this content through algorithms. The Surgeon General's advisory also calls for stronger safety standards overall, this includes transparency about how content is recommended, in addition to considering youth mental health when designing these platforms². There are various ways that platforms could adjust to these findings, whether it is by changing how their algorithms recommend content, or even introducing new settings that would specifically limit a user's exposure to filtered images, and certain curated content.

Clinical and Parental Intervention

Finally, it is important to find solutions to this issue at the individual level. This can be carried out through both clinical and parental intervention. Research notes that open communication about experiences online, as well as setting boundaries around screen time can help to reduce risks associated with body dissatisfaction and self esteem issues³. In addition, counseling and mental health services can be resources to help adolescents who are already experiencing negative self esteem effects because of certain media exposure. It is important to note that social comparison is one of the strongest psychological mechanisms which links social media use to body image concerns⁴. This suggests that these interventions should focus on helping teenagers recognize and work to reduce this comparison based thinking⁴.

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