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## **The Long-term Effects of Social Media Use in Young Girls**

### ***Introduction***

When social media was first created, it was targeted towards adults and used innocently to share basic information. Now there are no longer boundaries when it comes to posting, anything is fair game to be shared with the public. In the last decade, the younger generations have turned social media into a competition of who has the most followers, the most likes, and the best aesthetic. Researchers believe that, “Social media is a key resource in young people’s lives for the development of identities and relationships, as well as emotional regulation, self-expression, learning and much more” (Third et al., 2017). Although there is a benefit to the use of social media, do the benefits outweigh all the negatives created by using it? There is a constant pressure to be this ideal version of yourself online that can become overwhelming. The line between what is real and what is used as a façade has become almost indistinguishable, especially to young girls. Adolescence is anyone between the ages of 10-19 and “...represents a period of vast developmental changes that span across the physical, psychological, and social dimensions of an individual” (Salomon 2019). These transformative years can be challenging for

young girls, sending them on an emotional rollercoaster. Normal pressures from family, friends, school, and extracurriculars are already a great deal to bear, but when the pressure of social media is added to the equation, it can seem almost impossible to manage. Social media should be used as an outlet to empower, inspire, and encourage a young girl to show her true self, but with new normalized body standards and bullying, it can be anything but a positive outlet. The use of social media damages young adolescent girl's self-esteem and body image.

### ***Social Media's Lasting Impression***

Social Media is extremely prevalent in young adolescents' lives, presenting itself as a central hub for all interactions and relevant information. Most older generations cannot seem to understand the recent fascination and attachment to not only phones, but to these social media outlets. It seems that "Most teens are not compelled by gadgetry as such—they are compelled by friendship" (Boyd 2018). In the past friendship was based on who you spent the most time with. Now it is based around how many followers you have, or how many snapchat streaks you can get. This is the new normal of friendship and for older generations it is a hard concept to grasp. We spend time on our phones, because "It is not necessarily time spent on social media, but the quality of online interactions which affect wellbeing" (Marks 2020). These interactions can affect someone negatively and positively, but the way in which these communications happen are the same. By using social media and phones to communicate with others, it has put an awkward pressure on having face to face conversations. It has eliminated the need to make eye contact, tone when speaking, and the emotional value of a conversation. Instead of expressing themselves with words, they now use a slew of emojis, and abbreviations. For young girls this can affect their confidence when speaking and can make them feel shy and awkward when talking to others. In years of growth such as middle school and early high school,

“...early adolescents are forming attitudes about their bodies. During puberty, as sexuality becomes more salient, the perception of one’s own physical appearance becomes increasingly important to self-worth, with weight and shape concerns directly affecting adolescents’ global self-worth” (Salomon 2019). Now are they hyper aware of both their communication, and the way they are viewed by themselves and by others. Young girls go through more of a drastic physical change than boys do, and usually much earlier in their lives than boys. These changes can make them feel isolated and extremely uncomfortable in their own skin. Within the recent years of social media spiking in use, “...some claim that media engages young people in healthy and productive ways, there are those who insist that its effects are damaging to both youth and society” (Hall, 2011). It seems that although it can be healthy for young adolescents to have a platform to express themselves, the dark side of those platforms prevails. These apps may be described as “social”, but they can create an overwhelming sense of isolation and self-deprecation.

### ***Social Platforms Primarily Used***

Snapchat and Instagram are the most used social media applications by young adolescents. They both rely heavily on images instead of written communication. Instagram is used to connect with others by promoting yourself and in return receiving likes and comments. Snapchat is more communicative, but still based around your image, and posting for others to see. Both applications are hyper focused around making others perceive you a certain way. According to Goffman (1959), “we are all just actors trying to control and manage our public image” (McCrary 2020). No one wants to show the moments where they feel vulnerable and sad, but has this acting gone too far to where we cannot see people as anything but what they portray? This can affect young girls by making them feel pressure to always look their best, which can

later hurt their self-image. The trend of taking selfies has become popular over the last decade whether with friends, or by yourself. A surprising statistic is that “selfies are becoming increasingly popular with quantitative research indicating that every third picture taken is a selfie” (McCrory 2020). -We are a generation obsessed with the idea of ourselves, even though on the inside most feel insecure about the way they look. By having outlets like Instagram and Snapchat, we can receive the validation from others that we cannot give to ourselves. Filters are most found on snapchat, used to make someone look different and distort their true features. People become dependent on using filters and feel that without them they look ugly, leading to poor self-esteem. Editing apps are also a huge problem among young girls because it gives them the tools to edit not only their face, but their body to the standard of what they believe they should look like. If these applications did not exist, young girls would not feel the need to fix themselves but accept their bodies as they are.

### ***Self-Image is in the Eye of the Beholder***

Puberty is an uncontrollable factor that happens to young girls which changes their physical features drastically. Social media is a controllable factor that has a heavy influence over young girls. These two happening simultaneously can give young girls a list of worries regarding their body image. Body image “...refers to how a person views their own body, whether that view is a reality or not. Alysse explains that body image is not a single entity, but it includes attitudes, thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors that one has about their own body” (Webster 2021). There is an unsaid standard for what a girl should look like nowadays. Each decade has gone through what is considered beautiful by society's standards, and each year the desire to fit that standard grows. To a young girl who is impressionable, she is easily consumed by how people look, especially public figures she might see on social media. Unfortunately, young girls

forget to realize that some of these people are enhanced through surgery and cosmetic procedures. It is hard to wonder whether the standard for beauty is even attainable because it is hard to distinguish what is real, and what is not. Some are just genetically gifted, but others buy their way into being considered beautiful. Body image issues are more prominent now that social media is a place for portraying the best version of yourself. Body image issues can carry through middle, high school, and even into young adulthood. Words are powerful, and cyber-bullying contributes to many young girls' insecurities. One ignorant comment from someone online or in person can affect a young girl personally for many years to follow. It is hard to receive these kinds of comments when all young girls want is their friends and peer's approval. Body image is a constant struggle between your true self, and what you perceive yourself as.

### ***True Self vs Idealized Version of Self***

Most used social platforms would not be as popular if people were not willing to put their image, and personal information out there. There is a fine line between having confidence in oneself and having a good sense of self-esteem. Self-esteem is defined as "...the extent to which a person views themselves as worthwhile and competent" (Webster 2021). Self-esteem comes from how someone views themselves. If someone views you negatively, then it will have a greater impact on whether you think negatively of yourself. Meanwhile, confidence is considered a measure of one's faith in their own abilities. This is not pertaining to looks specifically but could when someone presents themselves in a social setting. Without a good sense of self-esteem, a young girl can tend to hide and become quiet when put into a social setting. Traits a young girl would have is to look down when speaking to someone, twiddling their hands due to nervousness, and stuttering while speaking. This poor self-esteem can stem from bullying, unrealistic comparison of friends, and the use of social media. "Social media users are

extensively exposed to photographs displaying idealized self-presentations. This poses a potential threat to youth's appearance self-esteem, but the negative impact may depend upon types of social media engagement. Youth who actively post updates (i.e., self-oriented social media use) may position themselves to receive positive feedback and appearance confirmation and thus show enhanced self-esteem, whereas youths who mostly view and respond to other's posts (i.e. other-oriented social media use) are exposed to these idealized presentations, while not receiving positive feedback on their own appearance, which may result in reduced self-esteem” (Steinsbekk 2021). Those who choose to limit their posing, or heavily edit their post create a harder version of themselves to live up to. Even though they are active in the sense of validating and complimenting others, it is important to be able to speak to yourself the way you speak to others. When a young girl lacks self-worth, there is limited possibility that they could have good self-esteem. Social media ruins young girls’ chances at having a healthy relationship with themselves. They can become too focused on pleasing others and disregarding their own needs. Our society preaches girl empowerment and loving all shapes, sizes, and differences, but it seems the only girls who receive praise are those who fit the standard. It is society's failure that most young girls feel they need to be a certain way to be even close to being considered “beautiful”.

### ***Society's Values or Personal Values?***

As a society, we are so influenced by those around us that we can forget that our own opinion is what should matter the most. The way you see yourself connects to your body image and your self-esteem. With a poor view of your body, the way you present yourself to others can be diminished. People tend to treat you based on the way you treat yourself. It seems that "The fundamental problem [with low self-esteem and poor body image] is the sense that our success

and power in the world is based on how we look," Kubala said (Abdul-Malik 2018). The idea that success and power equals how we look is surface level and not based on true talent or education is toxic. Terms coined like "pretty privilege" are real and make it hard to distinguish if something was given based on looks or based on talent. Someone who struggles with self-esteem and body image can have an equally hard time as those who are constantly objectified by society. Especially in young girls, we are told from a young age to "cover up" and that having a figure is distracting to men. There are social indifferences between men and women, and men usually are the ones to implement these differences, making them prominent. Young girls do as they're told, but is what they are told through their family, school, and social media the right thing? It is hard to think that "We're raising a bunch of insecure, fickle minded women who place too much value on materialistic things that won't stand the test of time" (Nigerian Tribune 2017). Wealth and the social hierarchy can be more influential than expected. Not only do young girls dream of the ideal body, but the ideal life as well. Traveling to foreign countries wearing designer clothing and enjoying some of life's pleasures that seem like a dream come true. We have forgotten the true value that lies in someone who is kind, educated, and lives for life's simplest moments. It has become a constant display of "who has more", but really it seems that those who have it all, on the inside have nothing.

### ***Celebrities and Public Figures Influence***

Many celebrities are seen as larger than life and it can be hard to remember that they are deep down regular people just like us. They have given up any sense of privacy to be extorted and constantly shown to the public for entertainment value. Public figures such as the Kardashian's have spent over a decade exploiting themselves for views, brand deals, and public attention. Young girls look up to the Kardashian's because of their over-the-top lifestyle including the most

expensive clothing, vacations, homes, and luxuries only the richest could afford. Most see through the fake and expensive exterior and see them for what they are which is talentless, entitled, and drama driven. Of course, young girls can be blinded to these attributes and start to idolize them which in turn skews their morals. A journalist described them best saying, “Their gargantuan egos, their petty jealousies, their catty feuds, the effort-vs.-eye-roll they put into reciting their lines, their commitment to frivolity at all costs – these are seductive qualities in a reality-TV star, however repugnant they might be in real life” (Sheffield, 2018). It is a shame that we do not give praise where it is deserved in those who are truly gifted, but we give praise upon those who are completely talentless, and self-obsessed. There is something to be said about those who come off as self-obsessed and even narcissistic, that they are deep down insecure and act that way for attention. Even though they are praised for their “perfect” figures and beauty, it can be questioned if their constant selfie taking is just a cry for validation, or a pit for their egos to thrive in. Everything the Kardashian’s stand for is what we need to teach young girls to do the opposite of. The term influencer is described as someone who has power over their audience, and I believe that the influence the Kardashian’s have over these girls must be put to an end. In the coming years, there needs to be an uptick in positive and realistic influencers, so that girls may not feel so much pressure, and feel better accepted and represented in the public eye.

### ***Studying Self Objectification in Young Adolescents***

In studies done over the past decade, researchers have attempted to find a correlation between the use of social media, and young adolescents. There are countless studies done regarding the wellbeing, happiness, and mental health of young adolescents that use social media versus those who do not. These studies raise the question whether there should be some type of age and time limit on the use of social media. Some say that it is beneficial to young adolescents

because it gives them an outside space to communicate with their peers and express themselves. The reason this should be discussed is because the negative effects overwhelmingly outweigh any positive that could be created for young adolescent's anywhere between the ages of 9-14. It has shown that, "Research on SNSs and body image thus far has proposed that engaging in SNSs (including taking and sharing selfies) can cause a more negative body image and higher self-objectification" (Veldhuis 2020). Social networking sites should be used for positive communication and validation, but most interactions are negative which leave lasting impacts. During this age, they are vulnerable and impressionable like a sponge ready to absorb anything in proximity, good or bad. The following visual table is a descriptive breakdown of gender differences in self-objectification behaviors. They took a study in 2016 of 142 seventh-grade students from four medium-sized public middle schools in the Upper South. The sample consisted of 99 girls and 43 boys aging from 11 to 14 years old.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Breakdown of Gender Differences in Self-Objectification Behaviors.

Self-objectification behavior	Total girls	Valid %	Total boys	Valid %	Chi-square test for gender differences, $\chi^2$ (df)
Asking for people to rate me or a photo of me	13	13.3	3	7.3	1.00 (1)
Posting pictures of me	59	60.2	15	36.6	6.48 (1)*
Posting pictures of me with other people	69	70.4	18	41.9	8.67 (1)**
Selfie of face only	55	56.1	15	36.6	4.41*
Selfie of body only	1	1.0	0	0	—
Selfie of both body and face	42	42.9	12	29.3	2.25 (1)

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .001$ .

### *Findings from the Study Conducted*

The overall result of the study was the approximately 80% of the seventh graders studied were using at least one social media account. The three main social media platforms used among the students were Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. They reported that the average time spent on social media was 4-6 hours weekly and participants reported engaging in more than two types of self-objective behavior while using. Girls are more likely to post things to receive positive feedback based on their appearance more than boys. In turn, the more time spent using social media, means the more time is spent posting a photo of oneself, which then requires more thinking about the self from an outsider's perspective. Those who do this will have greater worry for how the body looks, which associates with negative feelings about the body. In the end, "Their results showed that larger engagement in selfie related SNS use was related to more body concerns among young women, and this relationship was stronger for those reporting more photo investment and manipulation" (Veldhuis 2020). This study proved the theory that although it is popular to use among that age group, does not make it right nor benefit the young adolescents due to its effect on their body image and self-objectification tendencies.

### *Questioning the Status Quo*

Growing up in an age where technology has become so normalized it is hard to not compare, reflect, and regret some of the content we have put out into the world through social networking sites. When someone is young, they do not think of the consequences of their actions, or what others will think of them. Becoming old enough to use social media, is becoming old enough to understand that actions have consequences, and that people will always be thinking and talking about what is posted. There is always the question, how young is too young to start using social media? I believe that answer lies within everyone and what they feel is right. In my opinion, I do think young adolescents should be more sheltered and later start to

experience social media. Having social platforms can create a sense of anxiety and self-doubt. Constantly questioning your posts and whether they will be liked or not can be a strenuous task for an 11-year-old to handle. The earliest that young adolescents should be allowed to use social media platforms let alone cellphones should be no earlier than 8<sup>th</sup> grade. This is the time where young adolescents are starting to find a sense of self, and a comfortability in their verbal communication skills between themselves and others. I believe this would solve a lot of self-destructive, and social anxieties among young adolescents. For the sake of teen girls, it could prevent a lot of comparing, negativity in body image, and poor self-esteem. The time needed for a teen girl to develop a strong sense of self and confidence varies but giving everyone the time they need is what is most important. Being young there is that constant desire to be older and wish to be seen as an adult. Until we reach that desired age, we can forget to cherish that time we were given to not worry so much about what has yet to come. The time spent worrying about what has yet to happen could have been used to just enjoy the moment and appreciate the innocence of not worrying or caring.

### ***Conclusion***

As a society it is up to us to make these platforms better environments for these young girls. It is unfair to have them try to navigate this alone, and if it were me in their shoes now, I would feel petrified with the overwhelming idea that I will never be enough. But what makes someone enough? Is it to fill your life with comments and likes from superficial social media robots and people behind screens, or is it to live your life the way you want, and hope that people mind their own business? To a young girl, social media and the approval of their friends is all there is to life. The approval of peers is something that will never change, but the idea that social media is all there is to life can. There must come a time where we step away from this social

media driven society we have come to know and accept. Teaching girls when they are young to not seek approval and validation from others is something that could help prevent insecurities later in life. It is the battle between giving up social media or giving up on these young girls. Social media will always remain, but what message it sends will change by people becoming better role models, advocacies, and friends to the future generations. If someone had been there for me when I was in the peak of middle school, my outlook might be different depending on the age it is deemed appropriate to start using social media today. There is no way to change our past, but we must embrace the experiences we have been through that have molded us into the people we are today. Young girls might feel like the years of awkward isolation may never end, but there is always something better waiting. May we acknowledge these hardships and allow them to realize that they are not alone, and they are strong, kind, and beautiful just the way they are.

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