

In a virtual universe of 'perfect' bodies, Instagram's new policy offers important protection for young users

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Instagram recently announced posts promoting diet products and cosmetic procedures will no longer be visible to users under the age of 18. While the initiative is being led by Instagram, the policy will also be in place on Facebook.

Under the policy, posts that feature an incentive to buy a product, such as a discount code, or include a price, will be restricted to users over 18.

Instagram says this new measure comes in response to the [increased frequency of "influencers" advertising weight loss products](#), diet teas and supplements, and cosmetic procedures.

Meanwhile, posts that make "miraculous claims" about diets or weight loss products and are linked to a commercial offer will be removed completely from the app. So for example, if an influencer posts a picture of themselves drinking diet tea, telling their followers they managed to lose 20 kilos solely thanks to the tea, and promoting a discount code, this post will be removed.

As well as individual posts, it appears entire Instagram accounts have already been taken down. And while the onus falls on Instagram to enforce the policy, users can also report posts that violate the guidelines.

On a broad scale, it's great to see an influential tech giant like Instagram taking action to prevent the proliferation of health claims that have no scientific basis.

For young people in particular, this new policy will ensure they're not marketed treatments they don't need, or that could even harm their health.

Why is this a good thing?

This latest policy follows Instagram's stance against [online bullying](#), and their move to hide the number of "likes" from posts. These recent actions recognize the growing body of evidence pointing to the [effects of social media](#) on young people's mental health and self-esteem.

Adolescence is a time of heightened body image concerns. A large [Australian survey](#) found 22.8% of [adolescent girls](#) described themselves as "very concerned" about their body image, and 18.7% described themselves as "extremely concerned." Of boys, 9.4% described themselves as "very concerned" and 6% described themselves as "extremely concerned."

High levels of social [media](#) use by adolescents is associated with [poorer mental health](#), and, in particular, increased body image concerns.

This is especially the case when it comes to engagement with highly visual social media, like Instagram, and involvement in [photo-based activities](#) such as taking "selfies" and digitally altering images.

Some popular types of social media posts have been shown to have a particularly [negative influence on body image](#). These are ones specifically promoting being thin—"thinspiration" (or "thinspo"), and those promoting fitness and [muscle tone](#)—"fitspiration" (or "fitspo").

Greater social media use increases a teen's belief in the importance of achieving the thin body ideal for girls and the lean, muscular ideal for boys. This can lead them to judge their own bodies against the highly selected images presented by celebrities and peers on social media.

[Research has shown](#) viewing images of females with cosmetic enhancements influences young women's desire for cosmetic surgery.

So in pursuit of what's seen as the ideal body type, young people may be vulnerable to the marketing of diet products and cosmetic surgery. Especially when promoted by someone they admire, they could be easily seduced into believing these offerings will provide the solution to their problems—regardless of their actual appearance.

These products can cause harm

From detox teas, to diet pills, to "appetite-suppressing" lollipops, the list goes on. Diet products often promote a "quick-fix" solution for weight or fat loss which is tempting to believe. However, there's rarely reliable evidence to support these claims.

Marketing these products as foods means they bypass the usual controls to determine if a product is effective and safe to use.

Many products are potentially unhealthy. For example, [detox teas](#) act as a laxative and can cause dehydration. For other products, the risks associated with their use are unknown.

Use of diet products and self-directed dieting may also lead to other health problems. Once engaged in dieting behavior, young people are more likely to use more extreme measures including laxatives and diet pills.

They may also begin patterns of restrained food intake or binge eating, [increasing their risk](#) of developing clinical eating disorders.

There's still more to be done

With these issues in mind, it's encouraging to see Instagram and Facebook taking this socially responsible step.

But why stop at [diet](#) and cosmetic procedure products? Adolescent boys seeking to achieve "ideal" muscle tone are highly vulnerable to exploitative marketing of muscle-building dietary supplements.

These products are seldom effective and may also be harmful, having

been linked to [severe health issues](#) in children and adolescents, including liver failure. Further, regular use of muscle-building supplements can be a gateway to [anabolic steroid use](#).

Although enjoyed by millions, social media has a dark side, and it's impossible to provide a safe environment for all. It's essential teens are equipped with skills to understand and negotiate their social media environment and the images they see.

But it's also valuable to have the support of social media providers in managing the commercial and advertising aspects of social media in this way. The challenge now for Instagram will be ensuring this new policy is enforced consistently.

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