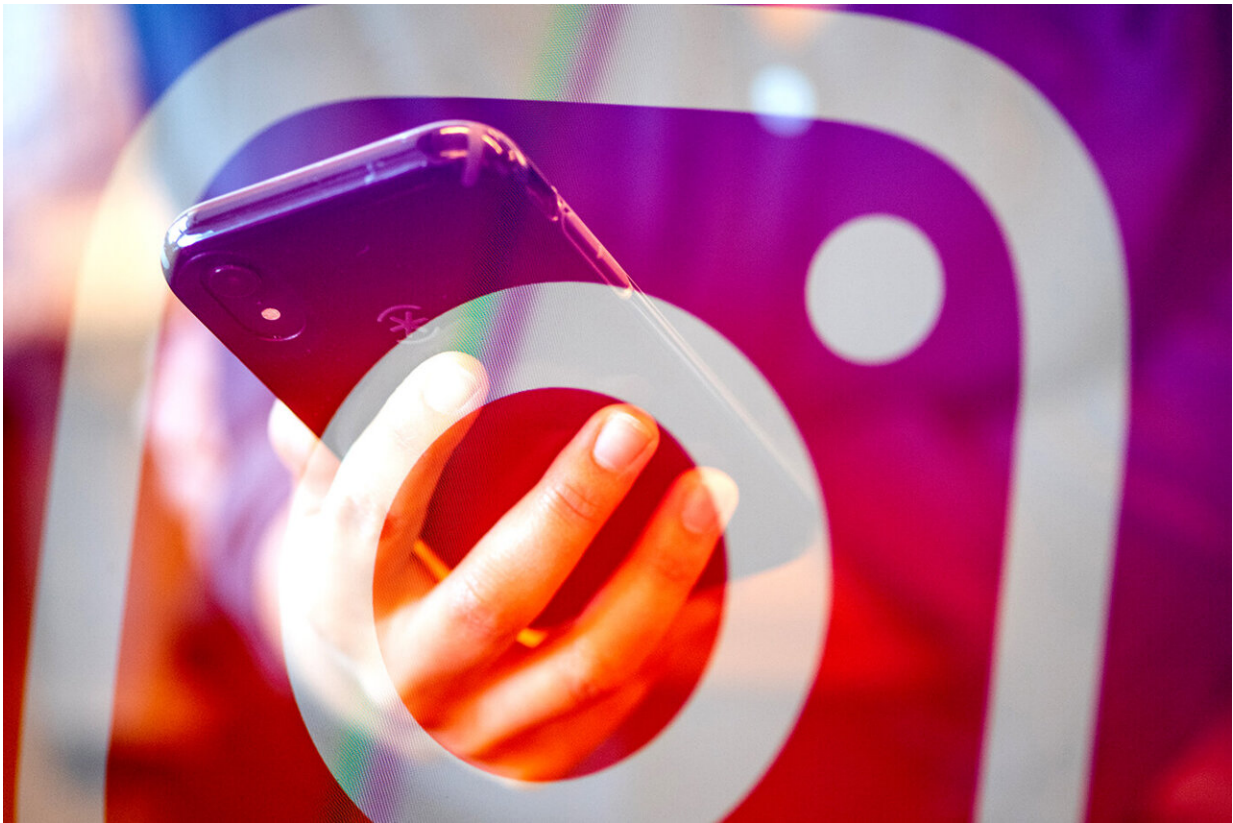


Why does Instagram have a negative effect on teenagers' mental health?

September 21 2021, by Molly Callahan



Credit: Matthew Modoono/Northeastern University

Since at least March 2020, Facebook officials have known that Instagram—the photo-sharing app owned by Facebook, Inc.—has the power to make teenagers feel worse about their bodies, according to an

internal report obtained by the *Wall Street Journal*.

"Thirty-two percent of teen girls said that when they felt bad about their bodies, Instagram made them feel worse," Facebook researchers wrote in the presentation about the negative effects of Instagram, according to the *Journal*.

The effect may have as much to do with the mechanics of the app itself as with its audience, says Rachel Rodgers, associate professor of applied psychology at Northeastern. The highly visual nature of [social media platforms](#) favored by younger people—TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram—put a social premium on appearance, says Rodgers, who studies sociocultural influences on body image and eating concerns. At the same time, the adolescents drawn to them are still developing their sense of identity.

"It's a bit like animals whose shells are still growing to protect them; it's a really vulnerable time," she says.

But, Rodgers says, there is a way to engage with these social platforms in a more balanced, healthier way. It just takes a lot of work.

What did you make of the findings about the negative effects of Instagram obtained by the *Wall Street Journal*?

I can't comment on what Facebook may have collected in terms of their own data or how they went about that, but I think substantively around the question of whether or not these and other platforms are related to negative mental health impacts—particularly among [young people](#)—we know from a lot of independent research that that has been shown to be the case.

Particularly in the areas I'm most familiar with, we know there are

effects on young people's feelings about their appearance, their body satisfaction, and social media platforms can increase risk for eating disorders and other mental health concerns such as depression and low self-esteem. We know that cyberbullying occurs among young people, we know that for some young people, the consequences of that can be extremely damaging. There's no doubt that there's substantial research showing that these platforms can have a negative effect on young people.

What is it about using these types of social media apps that has such an effect on mental health?

There's a conjunction between what it is about the application and what it is about the audience.

In my opinion, which is supported by data, there are a lot of things that make the apps deleterious: There's the fact that the more popular applications with young folks are highly visual. You're only consuming pictures and you're also invited to only produce pictures of yourself. Both of those things orient you towards thinking that your appearance is a really important piece of you—if you're only seeing photos of other people and only posting photos of yourself, it emphasizes that appearance is a really important part of self-worth, which we know is a risky way of considering appearance because intrinsically appearance is going to change over time.

These apps are also highly interactive—one of the points of posting is to get feedback. Obviously, you always hope that feedback is going to be positive, but every young person knows that that's not always the case, either because they themselves have gotten negative feedback or because they've witnessed someone receiving negative feedback. In a conceptualization where you are only worth what your picture is, that's a direct reflection of your worth as a person. So, that becomes very

impactful.

And then there's the fact that there's a real blurring between corporate interests and individual interests.

Then, you bring those characteristics together with [younger people](#) who are developing their identity. As an older adult, there are a number of things in your life that you can achieve that can put appearance in the background or balance out a negative experience, but when you're 14, you don't have that. It's a bit like animals whose shells are still growing to protect them; it's a really vulnerable time.

How is the experience of viewing images on Instagram, Snapchat, or TikTok different from consuming them in magazines?

Teens are still developing an understanding of marketing intent and the amount of affection and curation that goes into images in any kind of post, really. The level of literacy around the fact that these images are highly curated and often digitally altered is really variable. You hear people say, "Well this is a video on TikTok, so it must be real because you can't alter videos." And of course, you can filter videos just like you can filter photos. There's a disconnect around the likelihood that this was edited in some way and how "real" is it?

But there's also some difficulty in understanding that even if this post isn't explicitly selling me a product, it was placed here with a particular self-promoting intent. Nobody posts to social media in the hopes that people think they're unattractive, unpopular, someone you wouldn't want to hang out with.

There's also the added wrinkle of algorithms that can

fill your feed with ads based on what they think you're interested in—how does that play a role?

If we're thinking about adolescence and the importance of norms: If you think that what you're seeing is the same as what everybody else is seeing, that [peer pressure](#) is going to make a much stronger impact on you than, say, somebody who's 25 years old.

Is there a way to engage with these apps as a younger person that will be healthier or more balanced?

I think there is, and I think there are intrinsic limitations to these apps.

Some of the difficulties that are software-related are how hard it is to tell the algorithms you don't like something. You can try to play them by overexposing them to the things you do want to see, and that will kind of automatically reduce the things you don't. But Facebook and Instagram don't have dislike functions, it's really hard to say "I don't like this, I don't want to see it."

The other thing is that they're highly visual—it's really hard to interact on Snapchat or Instagram that doesn't somehow talk about appearance because text just isn't a big part of it.

I do think that young people can interact with these in better ways and some of them really do, but when they describe that, you see how effortful it is and how deliberate it has to be and the way that it, in some ways, sort of sets them apart. You can spend a lot of time getting the algorithms to learn the type of things you're interested in and then they will show you prosocial content [content that encourages prosocial behavior, or behavior through which people benefit others] or the brands that are high on [corporate responsibility](#) or sustainability or whatever

your values may be.

You can also be very deliberate about who you follow, what you follow, to try to curate your online space. You can be careful about how much time you spend on it. You can choose not to participate in the pressure to make yourself highly visible, but again this is onerous as a young person because it means asking people not to tag you, and explaining that you don't have one when people ask for your handle.

I do think it's somewhat telling that the best way to do this healthfully is just not to do it.

Do these companies have a responsibility to the young people who are using their platforms to make it easier to use them in a healthy way?

I would personally say that we all as humans have a responsibility to make the world a safe, equitable, prosocial place. I would agree that companies do, and I think that's true of all companies: It's true for clothing companies and beauty companies, all companies that profit from making people feel that their appearance is inadequate. I think it's also true of us and other users. It's a social responsibility, it's something that the people who are deriving the most benefit from should care the most about.

Provided by Northeastern University

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