

Research reveals cyberbullying is pushing teenage girls towards cosmetic procedures

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Adolescent females subjected to appearance-related cyberbullying are more likely to feel ashamed of their bodies, a desire to change their appearance and suffer eating disorder symptoms, according to UniSC

research [published](#) in the *Journal of Eating Disorders*.

University of the Sunshine Coast neuroscience researcher Taliah Prince said the results were concerning, given that appearance-related [cyberbullying](#) was the most common form of cyberbullying experienced by adolescent females.

"We found 98% of the adolescent females surveyed had experienced cyberbullying and that the majority of these incidents were appearance-related, where they were teased or insulted about their [body weight](#), shape or physical features," Ms. Prince said.

"More than 96% of these appearance-related cyberbullying victims expressed a desire to change their appearance as a result—which can lead to harmful behaviors like extreme dieting and [excessive exercise](#)—while 81% felt the need to change their appearance through cosmetic procedures."

Ms. Prince, a Ph.D. candidate at UniSC's Thompson Institute, said it was believed to be the first study to comprehensively investigate the effects of appearance-related cyberbullying on girls' mental health and well-being.

"This is important because eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of all psychiatric disorders among adolescent girls, and [body dissatisfaction](#) is the leading risk factor for eating disorders," Ms. Prince said.

"Because appearance-related cyberbullying is associated with body dissatisfaction and eating disorder symptoms, we must understand its prevalence and impact and how it might be contributing to these serious mental health conditions."

The findings demonstrate the profound consequences of appearance-related cyberbullying at a particularly vulnerable time in brain development.

She said it highlighted the urgent need for guardians, educators and policy-makers to be made aware of what young women are being subjected to online, and what they can do to intervene.

"There needs to be more education around what our young people are being exposed to, targeted interventions, prevention strategies and restrictions around [social media](#)—especially given some adolescents are spending seven hours per day on [digital devices](#)," she said.

"Digital literacy is so important. We have to teach our young kids what they're going to see online, how to process the content they're receiving, how to report negative things they might encounter and navigate the digital world safely.

"It's crucial to foster open communication about cyberbullying and body image, and to implement age-appropriate social media guidelines and support health promotion programs that encourage positive online behavior and positive [body image](#)."

Ms. Prince is now turning her attention to the neurobiological effects of appearance-related cyberbullying on adolescent girls.

"Neuroscience is still quite new in this area. There is only one study that has looked at real-time experiences of cyberbullying in young adults, but nothing specific to appearance-related cyberbullying among adolescents," she said.

More information: Taliah Prince et al, Appearance-related cyberbullying and its association with the desire to alter physical

appearance among adolescent females, *Journal of Eating Disorders* (2024). [DOI: 10.1186/s40337-024-01083-z](https://doi.org/10.1186/s40337-024-01083-z)

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