Poor body image linked with Facebook time

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Dr Amy Slater

Teenage girls are spending a concerning amount of time on the Internet, potentially leading to low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction, research by Flinders University reveals.

As part of the NetGirls project, Flinders psychologist Dr Amy Slater has surveyed 1100 adolescent girls from 18 different high schools across South Australia to determine how the Internet impacts their sense of identity and body image.

The survey found girls in Years 8-9 were spending more than one and a half hours a day on social networking sites and had an average of 215 Facebook "friends" – with some girls having more than 600 contacts.

On average, survey participants spent three hours and 27 minutes a day using Facebook, chat sites and watching TV – well above the Australian guidelines that recommend no more than two hours of screen time per day for adolescents.

More than 40 per cent of respondents said they were dissatisfied with their weight and girls who spent more time grooming, listening to music and using the Internet generally felt worse about themselves and their bodies, and experienced higher feelings of depression.

In comparison, girls who reported spending more time doing homework had more positive feelings about their bodies, a stronger sense of identity and reduced feelings of depression.

Dr Slater, a research fellow in the School of Psychology, said that although TV commercials, magazines and other forms of mass media are frequently criticised for their portrayal of women, the Internet is likely just as influential in shaping teenage girls' views of themselves and their bodies.

"The same ideals that are presented about women's bodies on TV and in magazines are also reflected on the Internet, for instance we found high levels of beauty products and weight loss ads on websites aimed at young girls," Dr Slater said.

"Body dissatisfaction consistently comes up as one of the biggest, most important issues for young people and our research has shown that the alarming amount of time these girls are spending on the Internet may have a huge impact on the way they think and feel about their bodies."

Despite the countless worldwide studies on the representation of women in the media, Dr Slater said the role of the Internet and social networking needs further investigation.

“There’s not a great deal of research about it at the moment so once we’ve finished this study we’d like to look at the issue in more detail, including how girls are using Internet sites, the types of pictures they’re posting of themselves and how this makes them feel.”

She said the ongoing NetGirls project, which is part of an Australian Research Council funded project awarded to Flinders University Professor Marika Tiggemann, will be repeated later this year with the same group of girls to examine how internet use and attitudes develop with age.

Dr Slater’s work, including studies on the premature sexualisation of young girls, received one of Flinders Vice Chancellor’s Awards for Early Career Researchers, an annual acknowledgment of researchers who have made a noteworthy contribution to the University since finishing their PhD.

Provided by Flinders University

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