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Madison Jones
Bridgewater State University

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From Fitspiration Posts to Food Shaming: Social Media's Impact on Adolescent Girls' Body Image

Madison Jones

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Dr. Michele Meek, Thesis Advisor   Date: 5/3/2022

Dr. Jessica Birthisel, Committee Member   Date: 5/3/2022

Dr. Thomasena Shaw, Committee Member   Date: 5/3/2022

Abstract:

Social media is marketed as a way to connect and share with others all over the world—a fast way to connect to grandma down in Florida, do research from a university on the other side of the world, or even spark environmental change across the globe. So how, at the same time, can this be a harmful tool, one that has been identified as a cause of depression and even, in some cases, suicide in young girls? Social media sites like Instagram, FaceBook, and TikTok encourage users to post pictures and videos that show your "best self" alongside a rating system of visible comments and like counts on each post. While social comparison is not new, social media has amplified it allowing people to compare themselves to hundreds of people in with endless scrolling and the expectation to "be liked" by everyone. Research has shown social media comparison impacts individuals' body image, particularly how it is affected by viewing other people's bodies that fit societal expectations when theirs may not. Several studies note specifically how social media negatively impacts adolescent girls and their body image and self-worth through various trends and personalized critiques. Through the examination of fitspiration posts and food shaming hashtags, I detail examples of negative body image in the demographic of adolescent girls, and I call for awareness and changes in social media.

Introduction:

The Boys and Girls Clubs of America found that 80 percent of girls interviewed had "downloaded a filter or used an app to change the way they look in photos by the time they're 13 years old"("#Theselfietalk: A Must-Have Conversation with Kids in the Digital Age"). Social media has become ubiquitous in adolescents' lives—40 percent of its users are 22 years old and younger, and about 22 million teens access sites like Instagram on the app or website every day

("#Theselfietalk: A Must-Have Conversation with Kids in the Digital Age"). However, adolescent girls who use social media often come across manipulative posts and ideals that can negatively impact their body image. Interactions such as fitspiration posts (fitness inspiration geared informative posts), food and diet trends, and food shaming hashtags all can impact girls' self-image and self-confidence. While such posts and trends might not always be deliberately malicious, they nonetheless can lead to harmful impacts like eating disorders. It is due to the potential of these platforms that mindful usage must be encouraged, and negative effects be discussed. Throughout this paper, I utilize various sources from research studies to journal articles to present the effects of social media usage on body image in adolescent girls. This will be a meta-analysis of information through scholarly research of various hashtags and trends that has been reported by researchers and interviewers, since in this single semester project I did not have adequate time to conduct direct surveys or interviews. Through my research, I recommend ways of moving forward with greater awareness of this issue and recommendations for future research. Ultimately, I recommend changes within social media use habits as well as revisions in applications and platforms.

Social Comparison on Social Media

The American Psychological Association defines social comparison as: "the proposition that people evaluate their abilities and attitudes in relation to those of others in a process that plays a significant role in their self-image and subjective well-being" ("APA Dictionary"). The connection between social media and social comparison theory has been closely researched. For example, in a study "Perfectionism as a vulnerability following appearance-focused social comparison: A multi-wave study with female adolescents," authors Marianne Etherson, Thomas

Curran et al. surveyed 135 females (with an average age of 14 years old) four times over the course of four weeks and found that 80 percent of responses to the question, "What context did you compare yourself in?" were in the sphere of social media" (Etherson). Furthermore, the study found that girls' comparing themselves to others correlated with the presence of depressive feelings and other forms of dissatisfaction.

Social media is not just a place to post about yourself; individuals also come to view and interact with other people's posts. A social media app or website does not require a user to post, so in theory, people can solely view other people's profiles and posts if they choose. In fact, "Most young people report posting their own content to social media far less frequently than they check or scroll through other people's content" (Rideout "Digital Health Practices, Social Media Use, and Mental Well-Being Among Teens and Young Adults in the U.S"). In doing so, they might be either consciously or subconsciously comparing themselves to the people they are viewing. For example, they can compare financial status when seeing other people traveling or relationship status when they see people posting their significant others. But one common way that people compare themselves is regarding their body image and how they look. In 2020, Helen Monks led a team of fellow researchers to investigate young women of an average age of 22 as they compare themselves to models and other people their age and younger on social media apps. Some of the participants remarked on using social media apps and comparing themselves to other people. One of the participants, Maya, commented, "Both men and women are constantly bombarded with an image of what women should look like and I don't think it is realistic of the different body shapes that there are and…I think it's hard to not be affected by that" (Monks). In other words, even as some social media users are aware of the problem of unrealistic ideals set about by social media, they nonetheless still can find themselves affected by them. This study

also shows that the effects of social media continue into later adolescence, as the participants were in their 20s. Competition can run rampant on social media where users can continuously view other people's victories as their own losses.

With nine out of ten teens and young adults reporting using social media and "teen girls enjoy[ing] using social media much more than boys do: Forty-two percent say they enjoy it 'a lot' compared with 27% of teen boys" (Rideout "The Common Sense Census"), it can be said that this comparative nature is prominent in some of social media's most active users. Being at an age where they seek approval from people their age, teens and adolescents grow fond of the approval from their peers on social media posts. In a report examining both girls' and boys' usage of social media, author Victoria Goodyear mentions that "young people can become obsessed with the ways they look on social media, and it has been suggested that some are addicted to the feedback they obtain" (Goodyear). This approval and perception of others can influence drastically the choices they make regarding their posts and interactions on social media sites.

Comparison can be even more troubling through influencers who are advertising products that are appearance-altering and marketed as weight-loss regimens. Users often gather inspiration from influencers all while they and the social media companies are making a profit. Currently, influencers are a powerful way for corporations to advertise products: "global spending on influencer marketing is skyrocketing, from around $2 billion in 2017 to an estimated $15 billion by 2022, and some companies spend up to 75% of their overall marketing budgets on influencers" (Scholz). With an investment this large, influencers put a lot of their efforts into marketing products from diet pills, weight-loss smoothies, body shapewear, and more. In many ways, influencers and corporations are capitalizing on the objectification of female bodies in the

media, and the tendency for people to compare themselves to others while believing they fall short.

The Theory of Objectification

Social media is often described as a way for people to "share" what they are doing with friends and family. The purpose of sharing is for other people to view and interact with the post. People can react to the post often with a "like" or an emotive button to show that they saw the post. However, when users post images of their own bodies, they might be intentionally or unintentionally objectifying themselves for viewing and commenting on by others. Seeing that adolescent girls live in a culture that objectifies young women, the stakes might be higher. "Objectification theory" suggests that the "sexual portrayal of women in society promotes a culture where women are seen as objects for the viewing pleasure of others" (Rounsefell). For adolescents, the viewing of the post and thoughts regarding them does not end the second they start to scroll away from the picture or video. Instead, they might pick up beliefs, habits, and unhealthy behaviors such as extreme dieting and exercise to obtain an unrealistic image they are seeing online. Social media should be marketed as a place for the users to find enjoyment posting about themselves in addition to posts about others, yet being objectified undermines that and alters the social media entertainment aspect. In fact, many images shown to users contain objectifying content regardless of searching for it or not, as Garcia notes, "The images young women consume on [Instagram] every day are all too often sexually objectifying, primarily appearance focused, and edited by filters, communicating that the poster has achieved a perfect or idealized physical attractiveness." Physical attractiveness often appears to be the goal of many adolescents with the popular picture-taking format dubbed a "selfie" where the users take

pictures of themselves. Selfies have been a newer form of photography and has sequentially been popular in the younger generations such as Generation Z who have been referred to as "The Selfie Generation" (McDowell). While seemingly just for fun, selfies can have harmful effects. An investigation of selfie practices by Jacqueline Nesi and others reported "'self-objectifying social media use' (including posting selfies) is associated with greater body shame via increased body surveillance, with this mediation effect stronger among girls" (Nesi). With this being stronger within the demographic of adolescent girls, it begs the question of whether this transpires into adulthood. Researchers have looked at objectification in women as well, emphasizing the need to tackle this issue in girls to prevent it from continuing into adulthood. For example, in a study by Jesse Fox, Megan Vendemia and others, they researched the effects of talking photos like selfies, as well as photos of other objects, and they found that, "selfie takers demonstrated greater state self-objectification than women who took pictures of objects" (Fox). With this clear issue of objectification within social media use, it is important to analyze how often and why adolescents utilize these platforms—and what the impacts might be.

Media Usage Over Time

It is important to first reflect on the impact of medias in general on adolescents over time. Various forms of media such as books, magazines and television shows have influenced the younger generations prior to the emergence of social media. The problem lies with the ever-present aspect of social media compared to other forms of media. For example, while in the past a magazine subscription might issue new content once a month, now social media has the power to distribute content at every second of every day, as users are able to access search engines that can show them old and new content at any moment of the day. Social media content is also unfiltered, as anyone with access to an account can post something to a social media platform,

whereas published media like magazines and books must go through an editorial processes that monitors the content before it is distributed. In only a few years, social media has risen to widespread use. For example, "When Pew Research Center began tracking social media adoption in 2005, just 5% of American adults used at least one of these platforms. By 2011 that share had risen to half of all Americans, and today 72% of the public uses some type of social media" ("Social Media Fact Sheet"). With social media appearing to gain in popularity with each passing year, it is important to assess especially how it impacts impressionable populations such as adolescents.

Social Media Usage Among Adolescents of Today

Numerous researchers have emphasized social media's impact on adolescents. As the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) reported in 2018, "on average, teens (13-17 years old) are online for almost nine hours a day, not including time for homework" ("Social Media and Teens"). According to AACAP, in 2018, two thirds of teenagers are reported to have access to the internet through their own personal mobile phones and devices. Yet, separating boys and girls, ages eight to 18, 68 percent of girls use social media everyday compared to 57 percent of boys (Rideout). This frequent use suggests that there is enjoyment or positive reasoning for this, yet it can actually be the opposite. Using social media can become addictive, and "some teenagers report it is challenging to quit or reduce their social media…and they feared missing out on important social opportunities if they did not frequently check their social media accounts" (Harriger). Since adolescents still have developing brains until age 25 (Aamodt), they might be particularly susceptible to the addictive nature of social media. Such intensive social media use such as this can directly impact mental health. In a 2019 study of over

6,500 U.S. boys and girls aged 12 to 15, the researchers found that those who spent more than three hours a day using social media might be at heightened risk for mental health problems ("How to Help Your Teen"). With girls using social media more than boys, this puts girls at a higher risk for these issues. Furthermore, according to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 88 percent of teens report that they have seen someone being cruel on social media sites ("Social Media and Teens"). This kind of cruelty results in many young teen girls taking actions to alter their image online or leaving the online space entirely.

On multiple occasions, polls and surveys have revealed the emotional and psychological effects that social media has had on this demographic. For adolescent girls, there is no one specific corporation or app that body dissatisfaction can be traced back to. Rather, specific hashtags and trends such as fitspiration posts, meal consumption trends, like counts, and comments each can contribute to body dissatisfaction.

The Downside of Fitspiration Posts

"Fitspiration," a play on the words "fitness" and "inspiration," refers to posts geared towards getting people to lead "healthier" lifestyles and practice fitness more routinely. In a *Psychology Today* article about fitspiration, Kathryn Stamoulis notes, "These posts emphasized the idea that you can always become a better, upgraded version of yourself" and "some even disparaged former 'unfit' selves." In other words, the idea that the user has become a "better" version implies a consistent need for improvement and can lead others to attempt to meet unrealistic "fitness" goals. In one research study on fitspiration posts, the authors found that, "#fitspo posts may motivate through appearance-mediated themes, as the largest content categories (based on the association text) were 'feeling good' and 'appearance'" (Santarossa).

Although posts like these often lack scientific evidence, viewers of these posts might not be aware before electing a new workout or exercise habit from an uncertified source.

Like diets, not all workout regimens and routines are for everyone—a fact not everyone might be aware of before picking up on a new trend. Fitspiration posts are often criticized for the fact that the "posts position sex appeal as the central goal of exercise rather than increased athletic ability, energy or strength" (Stamoulis). As a result, people's perceptions of the purpose of fitspiration can be warped. If teens only see people with their "ideal" body types on these posts, they can feel negative emotions especially if they are exposed to them over a period of time. For example, in a research study by Ciara Devereaux and Grace McGrew, they surveyed participants' usage of Instagram over a week and found that, "individuals reported significantly lower self-esteem on days when they were exposed to more before-and-after fitspiration images or sexually suggestive fitspiration images" (Devereaux). Exposing social media users to this content, in other words, can impact how they feel about their own body image and even change their own body image goals.

When it comes to the body types that are most represented on social media, there is a clear indication of the posts favoring a muscular and skinny body shape, as this is more often associated with being "healthier" in comparison to other body types. In a study analyzing more than 600 fitspiration images for their common factors, the researchers determined that, "the majority of images of women contained only one body type: thin and toned" (Tiggemann). With this being the primary imagery that is shown to young adolescent girls, it can negatively influence their mindset regarding their own bodies. If they don't think that their body fits into the "thin and toned" type, they might think negatively about themselves, especially seeing other users boast about "feeling good" in their thin bodies.

Fitspiration posts have been analyzed closely recently since they are a new fad within the social media world. In a research study by Ilaria Cataldo and others, they examined the negative body image effects in young adults and looked at the fitspiration trend's effect on various ages within that group. They highlighted that the "propensity to interact with social media is especially high at the age of 12-13 years, with users mainly looking for health and fit information" (Cataldo). This is also a red flag because according to Instagram, they require that everyone who uses the site be at least 13 years of age when signing up for an account (Protecting Young People on Instagram: Instagram Blog). If adolescent girls are thinking negatively about their own bodies and actively seeking out ideas on social media platforms, it might make them more vulnerable to partaking in the fitspiration posts' activities or routines that the person in the post suggests. In fact, many young women report body dissatisfaction as a result of fitspiration posts, as one researcher summarized: "exposure to fitspiration posts, in a group of 108 women, aged 17-25 years, significantly correlated with more severe negative mood and body dissatisfaction" (Cataldo). Fitspiration posts, in other words, can clearly have a negative impact on adolescent girls' own self confidence and body image.

Food Shaming as Enabled by Hashtags

Hashtags, a quick and simple way for people to be instantly directed to a popular theme or topic of the same hashtag without doing an in-depth search, are a popular quirk that is unique to social media. As mentioned on LifeWire, "By July of 2009, Twitter formally adopted hashtags, and anything with a # in front of it became hyper-linked. The move was later accentuated when Twitter introduced 'Trending Topics,' placing the most popular hashtags on its homepage" (MacArthur). This is similar to doing a keyword search on a library database, but

anyone can use the hashtag without certified verification of authenticity or use in the post. For example, someone can post something like "just had avocado toast for breakfast #friendship" and it wouldn't be taken down for not relating to the post. With anyone able to attach a hashtag to a post, people can reach an even larger audience. Other social media platforms have picked up this concept, and now, hashtags are used on just about every platform including Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and Pinterest. A study by Marika Tiggemann researched and polled young women on their feelings towards posts with and without hashtags, and found, "viewing unmodified images accompanied by hashtags led to greater facial dissatisfaction than viewing exactly the same images but without the hashtags" (Tiggemann). In other words, the association of hashtags with the media content can negatively impact the viewers of the post. Hashtags can market a lot of various topics and subjects, which can be great for people looking for a show or movie they like, but terrible for people who struggle with appearance-related issues. In a journal article regarding Twitter's tweets and hashtags in 2016, Jenine Harris discovered that over the course of one week of data collection: "Of the 1,035 tweets, 696 (67.2%) were relevant to body image, fitness, food, dieting, or eating disorders." This amount of exposure from just a week of samples relating to a sample of daily tweets from various users and accounts demonstrates how often adolescents likely are exposed to this kind of content.

Despite their seemingly helpful nature, hashtags can result in multiple negative opinions being grouped together. In Fairfax County, Virginia, the WUSA9 (a local news report channel) did a report on social media and teens bringing attention to the fact that "the phrase 'what I eat in a day' is currently a top trending hashtag on social media. With more than 8 billion views on TikTok alone, the trend encourages users to share what they do and don't eat over the course of a day" (DiAntonio). This encouragement for people to comment and reflect on the personal

matters of daily eating choices can result in individuals' hearing multiple people's opinions on their food choices and diets. Sometimes, those opinions can be unsolicited. If someone were to post a picture of their taco dinner with the hashtag #tacotuesday, for example, even though they are not directly asking for an opinion on their eating habits, someone can still reflect on their choices and leave a comment or direct message the person on the account.

Of course, hashtags are an aspect of social media that can have a positive effect as well. People can seek out people with similar interests and mindsets and find support from hashtags. Although social media might be a gateway for inspiring eating disorders, for example, it also can be a place for people to connect with others dealing with the same issues as well. Someone suffering from anorexia could do a hashtag search of #anorexiarecovery and find other people who are in recovery from anorexia and connect with other people who can understand on a level a friend who hasn't experienced anorexia would. For example, one poster Karolyn Gehrig uses hashtags with the phrase #hospitalglam to inspire others as well as herself despite her daily struggle living with Ehler-Danlos syndrome. She finds that, "The #hospitalglam photos are about statement, triumphantly announcing existence against the odds—and they feel all the more empowering for it" (Foster). Hashtags can also spread awareness and popularity about events and positive trends such as the #bodypositivity trend that has grown to be popular, encouraging people to post things on their screens that show they are thinking positively about their bodies instead of negatively.

Food and Diet Trends on Social Media

Trends are described as a common fad or action that multiple people partake in or recreate in their own way. It has also been described as something many people like or think of

as "cool" because of how popular it is. Social media trend examples include things such as outfits, dances, and captions. Yet, unfortunately, social media trends have been known to make people feel left out if they are not a part of the trend. In an interview on *Seventeen Summit*, called "Let's Talk About Body Image," researchers conversed with a bunch of young girls to get their opinions on social media's influence on body image. One girl, Kayla, aged 17, commented that, "I'm super-skinny, but right now, being thick is so trendy that I'm often bashed for my shape. Just like others are allowed to love their curves, I should be allowed to love my bird bones" (Stanley). With this trend, Kayla, along with other girls who are not curvy, can be outcast for their appearance, making them feel bad about themselves too. Some trends even encourage things that should be avoided, as Cindy Cole suggests, "trends like 'thinspiraton' and 'clean eating'….fill social media news feeds with images that in fact stigmatize weight, disordered eating, weight loss and dieting." In other words, social media trends can be a way young girls might be influenced into having negative opinions about their own body.

Trends have become a popular and preferred method of content production. For example, as mentioned above, one trend "what I eat in a day" shows the food and meals that a user consumes in a day. This is particularly popular on TikTok since the app enables short videos, a common format for this kind of trend. One user, @brattynattt, aged 22 years old, has posted more than 54 parts to this series as of early April 2022. Despite enjoying posting this kind of content, she still gets comments that question her eating habits such as a user saying "[shock face emoji] that's too much food" and another saying: "her veins, heart and stomach [skull and cross bones emoji]" (video captioned: "Pt.20"). Others have even negatively compared themselves to her commenting that "watching this while my body punishes me for eating a grilled cheese"

(video captioned: "Pt.20"). Seeing this kind of content and comments can be harmful for young girls who are frequent users of the platform.

Adolescent girls might be even more susceptible to posts by celebrities they admire who also get critiqued for their diets. One celebrity, rapper, Lizzo, has posted about her beliefs of body-neutrality. She has often been looked to for issues regarding body positive or neutral movements as she is a very open about being a plus-sized woman. In an interview with *Vogue*, she mentioned, "I would like to be body-normative. I want to normalize my body" (Paris). She elaborated on the specifics of her own body, grouping it in with other girls she feels are not accurately represented or targeted by the body-positive movement as: "Girls with back fat, girls with bellies that hang, girls with thighs that aren't separated, that overlap. Girls with stretch marks. You know, girls who are in the 18-plus club" (Paris). When she posts about what she eats, she asks for people not to comment on or give her advice on what she is eating, yet it often nevertheless happens. In one of Lizzo's TikToks, a user named George comments on Lizzo's breakfast by saying, "look at the amount of oil, are you kidding me? You're not gonna lose weight!" ("Greg doucant reacts…") despite her posting the video not asking for "a nutritionist's reaction" to her diet. This concept of lack of approval on social media is not new, as many people find themselves in online spaces without their consent or even knowledge due to group photos, and recently TikTok began to add features such as stitches and duets which allow other people to repost and use a prior video. Exposure to this content can cause adolescents to yearn for their own change in appearance if they view themselves to be similar to the people who are being critiqued. In a study by Rachel Rodgers, Amy Slater and others, 770 adolescents with a mean age of 12 years old were surveyed via a 5-point scale with responses to questions ranging from "Never" to "Always" regarding how they felt when viewing posts by celebrities and

random users' content. It was found that "low self-esteem and depressive symptoms were both correlated with the internalization of muscularity and social media-related appearance ideals, as well as appearance comparison" (Rodgers). Feeling such as low self-esteem and depression can be reason enough for these adolescents to take body-altering measures to achieve a desired appearance. Some of the most obvious ways include exercising and dieting.

Social Media as a Gateway to Disordered Eating

Eating disorders can do damage both mentally and physically. Creating a better relationship with your body lowers the chance of eating disorders from happening. As the National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA) states, "having a healthy body image is an important part of mental wellbeing and eating disorders prevention" ("What Are Eating Disorders?"). While the NEDA notes that there is "no single cause of eating disorders, research indicates that body dissatisfaction is the best-known contributor to the development of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa" ("What Are Eating Disorders?"). Eating disorders can result in suicidal thoughts and/or the need for in-patient care and medication. One of the most common eating disorder types is anorexia nervosa, which "has an extremely high death rate compared with other mental disorders" ("Eating Disorders: About More than Food"). Not only are people with "anorexia….at risk of dying from medical complications associated with starvation," but also, "Suicide is the second leading cause of death for people diagnosed with anorexia nervosa" ("Eating Disorders: About More than Food").

Since social media can often trigger body dissatisfaction, it can act as a pipeline to an eating disorder. Often on social media, people will even post about diet trends, detox sponsorship posts, or exercise regimens that can influence a person's diet and fitness routine, possibly leading

to an eating disorder. As one researcher notes, "Many social media influencers…showcase highly edited bodies…and exposure to unrealistic idealized images is linked to increased risk for disordered eating and body dissatisfaction through mechanisms such as self-objectification and appearance comparisons" (Harriger). Some of these "edits" include color alteration, removing acne and blemishes from the face, making the eyes bigger and sparkly, and even slimming down parts oof the body. This is also where social comparison is dangerous because someone might see someone on a social media site with their "dream body image" posting about how they got to that weight by dieting or doing a certain diet, and the viewer might want to do the same thing since they are comparing themselves.

It is important to note that while eating disorders are not a choice, eating habits and restrictions are, which can sometimes lead to eating disorders. However, not every diet and exercise routine will elicit the same results because everyone's bodies and genetic make-up are different, meaning they will react different to various nutrients, exercises, and schedules. Harvard Health conducted a study on diets and found that despite more than one third of Americans being on a diet at any given time, "popular diets simply don't work for the vast majority of people" (Shmerling), so there is already only a slim chance that a diet is going to yield the dieter a result they are happy with. In other words, the act of dieting can lead to further frustration, anger, confusion, and dissatisfaction. So, not only are social media users seeing people with a "desirable body type" but they are also seeing people who were able to succeed at dieting and looking a certain way while they are failing. This "failure" can further depress the individual all while they are restricting their body of the proper fuel and nutrients it needs. In Rachel Rodger's study regarding 12-year-olds' views of social media, specifically within girls, it was found that there was a "65% of variability in dietary restraint" (Rodgers). Desperation for

the beauty standard put in place by society calls for attention to be brought on this issue in order to prevent adolescent girls from resorting to methods of eating-disorder-related habits that can severely impact their physical as well as mental health.

Advocating More Responsible Social Media Use

By understanding that body image and dissatisfaction can lead to everything from low self-image to harmful disorders and mental illnesses, we can seek ways to combat social media's influence by becoming advocates for more positive social media software features and fostering better social media habits. There is much that can be done by social media companies, influencers, parents, and users in order to create a better online space. For example, influencers are people who reach large audiences, and, as their name suggests, influence others, so they should be aware of the impact that their posts can have on individuals, including adolescents. As one researcher says, "social media influencers should not represent companies that sell weight-control products but instead select marketing messages that are body positive" (Harriger). By using influencers as a place for positivity and overall good emotions, users will still be influenced but in a more positive way. After all, there is only so much that users know about the social media sites they are using, and a better education about the platforms' features are crucial in order to better handle the platform as a user. As Harriger suggests, "Users must be equipped with tools to combat the effects of the algorithms. For example, users can learn how to exert the control they have over what information algorithms direct them toward" (Harriger). Information is one of the best ways to combat negative impacts and create personal positive change. Adolescents have been described as being "tech savvy" but there is a lot to the technology world that is hidden. Harriger also noted how the Academy for Eating Disorders has made a request to

social media corporations to "increase transparency around the use of the algorithms and to make community guidelines regarding appropriate content as well as paths to report content more accessible for users" (Harriger). Accessibility will increase user comfort in addressing issues that they face when using social media applications, making self-accountability a possibility for an area of positive change.

Algorithms

It is important to also note why it is that certain types of content continue to be shown to users. This is due to algorithms, or a "technical means of sorting posts based on relevancy instead of publish time, in order to prioritize which content a user sees first according to the likelihood that they will actually engage with such content" (Golino). In other words, social media software designs home/explore pages that are custom built to what it believes the users are most likely to interact with based on previous interactions—all with a goal of getting users to stay engaged and continue using the application. It has been reported that, "such personalized recommendation algorithms help users by showing them relevant content, but they are also engineered in the interests of the platform to maximize user time and engagement on the site" (Saurwein). With social media platforms earning money off advertisements that are present on the platforms, the more active users are on their websites, the more money they make. In other words, the platforms are designed to maximize profits no matter the harm they cause, as one author writes, "It's certainly true that some of the things at the heart of the business models at the moment, such as 'recommend' algorithms and that link with advertising revenue, those business models have driven huge scale, huge growth, huge revenues and some of those design features are also at the root of the problem we have with safety and harm" (Dawes). A way in which this

can become a problem is if a user clicks on content, for example a fitspiration post, and this is instantly recorded in the algorithm and assumes that that is what the user wants more posts on their exploring pages to look like. The user might then see more content related to fitspiration, even if it is harmful to that individual.

Luckily, there are ways for users to help modify their algorithms. One way that a user can alter their algorithm is filtering posts that they do not want to view on their account by pressing a button that indicates that they are uninterested in the post. Applications like Instagram, for example, possess a feature where you can report a post as "Not Interested" and it will censor posts that are similar to the post selected. While it is clear that these algorithms work in favor of the platforms to make them a profit, as with the example above with Instagram, corporations have been known at times to update their platforms to help social media users.

Examples of Positive Change from Social Media Corporations

At times, corporations have addressed requests for application modifications, and there have been a couple of changes made for the better. In a response to outcries of negative impacts on body image, Instagram now allows users to have the option of hiding the "like count" on their posts. So instead of a post saying "932 likes" it will say, for example, "liked by user123 and others." While this is not a complete way to end social comparison of like counts because people can still click through and scroll and see how many likes the post got if they manually counted, it deemphasizes the number of likes that post received at first glance. This action limits the possibility of social comparison and makes the social media site appear like it is offering help to the users to curb this from being a potential issue. Another example of a positive change was one by Apple, who updated their settings to allow users to set app limits, preventing the user from

spending more than say, an hour on an app a day. This feature can lock people out of the app and alert them that their time is up. This can help combat the addictive nature of social media and enables the user to set their own limits and warnings. By placing control of the app into the hands of the users, it allows for preferences to become personalized.

Parental Involvement in Social Media and Screen Time

In the case of younger adolescents, parents can also take an active role as well. Parental controls are a way for parents to take the reins on their children's social media and/or screen time use. Parents can assist in limiting social media use in multiple ways from adjusting settings directly within the application to physically removing their child's device and placing it in a restricted location. In a news article published in the *Belfast Telegraph,* Deborah Webster, owner of her own social enterprise, Thrive Academy, notes that, "As well as keeping bedtime free from devices, parents should have set times and spaces in family life which are 'screen free' such as at the dinner table, or family movie or game nights." By restricting use, parents can wean their children off of their devices in a healthy way, using authority, if it is too difficult for the child to take matters into their own hands.

Another way to help combat this would be to encourage other activities that are just as stimulating in adolescents. Encouraging time outdoors, hands-on activities like coloring or sculpting with clay, can also entertain these young minds while providing them with a fun activity and limiting their use of social media platforms. A lot of kids report their social media addiction is in part due to the "fear of missing out," now a coined term of "FoMO," so creating more places for kids to play together in-person can prevent this from being a constant fear. Jealousy from not being present can lead to these negative feelings, preventing kids from

enjoying the events that they are doing in the moment. In a study evaluating the relationship between social-networking sites (SNS) and FoMO, author Lipeng Yin remarked that, "It is reasonable to assume that SNS addiction can trigger envy, which in turn would lead to FoMO. That is, envy can mediate the relation between SNS addiction and FoMO" (Yin). Especially with events that limit in-person activities such as the COVID-19 pandemic, this fear is amplified, and social media becomes a crutch for person-to-person interaction among teens. By understanding the fears adolescents face regarding the absence of social media, it can explain the consistent presence of this demographic on social media sites.

      Some individuals, however, can come away from this fear and make active and conscious choices when utilizing social media platforms. This is easier said than done because there are still going to be some individuals who will not take the initiative to put down their phone, set a screen time limit for themselves, or remind themselves that their body does not have to look a certain way. For example, it has been reported that, "Over 95% of 13-to-15-year-olds have a social media account…half of these adolescents report some usage every day, with 13% of girls—twice that of boys—reporting more than 3 h[ours] of daily usage" (Etherson). Rather than let that number grow, it would be beneficial to inform and guide adolescents to improve their usage of social media. Offering the idea of screen-limits could put the responsibility in the hands of the users and allow them to adjust their social media usage to their personal comfort levels. Yet, this is just the start of actions that can assist, as Barthorpe states, "Beyond distinguishing social media use from other forms of digital engagement, there is a growing consensus that future research must evolve beyond one-dimensional measures of social media screen-time" (Barthorpe). Actions like this at least provide hope for users to have some control in what can sometimes appear to be an out-of-control result from social media use.

What should be done next:

  One of the first things that needs to be done next is encouraging parents to be more active in their child's social media use. Making it clear that parents have the power to influence their children's choices of social media, or directly making choices for them is a way that children's social media use can be monitored by someone who has their best interests at heart. Parents should first attempt to sit down with their child and talk about their social media use and how they feel using it. By assessing how their child personally feels, they can better cater their assistance to the needs of the child.

  Next, is program software updates. More social media sites need to make direct changes to their applications to better suit the needs of the adolescents that inhabit the sites. Adding alerts of how long they've been online in-between their endless scrolling can help make users aware of their use if they have not set time limits themselves. Strictly enforcing age minimums of the applications and making them less easy to bypass can prevent the youngest of this demographic from using the app when they are not even of age yet. Applications can work more closely with influencers and make sure that they are not posting advertisements of brands or companies that promote things like fasting or diet meals/drinks. By better monitoring the content that gets published on their platforms, social media websites will be a better place for users to interact.

  Lastly, users must take the initiative to assess their social media usage. Adolescents should talk with a family member or trusted adult if they feel they have any issues regarding body image or disordered eating to get the best help. Assessing their current mental health status when using social media is an important step before continuing to use the platforms. Users should also consider deleting platforms that they deem unnecessary and do not add to their enjoyment. If one app seems to provide discomfort more than others, maybe instead of not using

social media, they can just delete that application from their device to limit their use that way. Users should also learn all that can be done to control their algorithm and alter their social media platform to best fit their needs. Knowledge is power, and knowledge of how to best adjust social media applications to fit their needs will give adolescent girls the power to take back social media for entertainment and enjoyment purposes.

Conclusion:

Social media continues to grow. However, the negative impact that social media has had on concepts such as body image, eating habits, and self-love within adolescent girls calls for awareness in this digital space. Through my research I found the damaging nature of social media sites and specifically how it impacts adolescent girls. Eating disorders and body dissatisfaction are just a couple of examples of how teens display the impact of social media. Social media apps do not come with a "side effect" warning, but perhaps they should. While it is important to recognize the positive impacts social media can have, teens might need education and guidance in order to refocus their social media usage to be more positive. Calling upon social media sites themselves to change their software and calling upon parents are other ways that this demographic can have a shot at having a positive experience using social media. Using social media as a platform to spread joy, uplift friends and family, and encourage a sense of togetherness can possibly make social media less of reason for girls' body dissatisfaction, and more of a place for body affirmation. By further educating teens on the risks associated with social media use, we can hopefully combat the harms associated with social media and make these sites a more welcoming and positive place for everyone, for generations to come.

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