

Are teenage girls addicted to social media? A psychology prof chimes in.

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The recent court decision that ruled against Meta and YouTube, on the grounds that they caused mental harm to a young woman's perceptions of her body, suggests that social media has addictive properties.

However, contrary to popular reports, the court didn't determine that social media led to addiction. Although many people are understandably upset at social media for effects they lay at that doorstep, there is a difference between feeling angry about possible social media effects and psychological facts about addiction.

Addiction is defined as a state of physical, neurological, and psychological dependence on a particular activity that leads to compulsive engagement, undermining individual choice, that has harmful consequences. There is virtually no scientific evidence that use of social media body image posts has aversive physical or neurological effects, and it is difficult to prove that they have led young people to relinquish their

volitional control, in the way that jells with addiction to other social behaviors, like drinking, drugs, and gambling.

So is social media off the hook?

Not so fast. Social media may not addict young women to its body image posts, but it still has subtle, important effects. That's why careful social science research is important, and studies show that even if social media does not have psychologically addictive properties, it nonetheless exerts negative effects that are worth appreciating.

And social media exerts a greater aversive impact on adolescent girls' appearance concerns than on boys' because an attractive appearance is a more important part of women's traditional gender role than men's, even today.

Research convincingly shows that exposure to social media beauty ideals leads young women to feel dissatisfied with their bodies. Use of social networking sites is also associated with wanting to be super-thin.

The key reason these effects occur is because adolescent girls compare them-

selves to other girls their age. As one young woman put it, "Instagram is ruining my life, my self-confidence and self-esteem. There's always women with the most radiant, flawless, perfectly proportionate bodies. I might be indirectly comparing myself to them."

Adolescent girls tend to make upward social comparisons, to those who are more attractive than they are. But upward social comparisons can depress women's body image, as they end up contrasting their appearance with those of idealized peers or social media influencers, leading to self-deflating views of themselves.

And while social media doesn't addict girls to focus on feminine beauty posts, algorithms that ceaselessly push content recommendations and autoplay videos that play videos automatically without a user's choice can harm girls who tend to be psychologically susceptible to body image issues.

Since social media continues to have immunity from prosecution for its content, even in the face of the recent Meta/YouTube

lawsuit, it's best to look to persuasion, not coercion, as an antidote — for example, by developing media messages that have prominent social media influencers warn girls of the hazards of excessive social media use, or encouraging females to view body-positive posts that celebrate bodies of different shapes and sizes.

It is fashionable to blame social media for all of society's social ills. While that may be comforting by taking the onus off of other, more personal factors at play, it is not an effective strategy to help reduce adolescent girls' focus on their body image.

Given the reservoir of talents that young women can contribute to the world, it is important to help them turn away from a socialized preoccupation with their bodies to the more rewarding cultivation of their minds.

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