

#Let Me Take a Selfie: Social Media's Influence on Teenage Girls

Research on Social Media and Inclusivity in Teenage Girls

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Composition 211

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Abstract

In society today, social media plays a huge role in everyday life. It is literally available at the palm of the hand any time throughout the day. Because of this easily accessible media, it causes effects on teenage girls at the touch of a button. Most of the time, these effects are negative; such effects can include low self-esteem due to teenage girls wanting to look a particular way, eating disorders to try to achieve the ideal body, and the never ending cycle of caring too much or too little about their appearance. All of these have the possibility of sticking with the teenage girls throughout their whole life. These effects are caused by the “ideal” body that their friends on social media portray. This in turn portrays the message that teenage girls need to look a certain way to fit into society’s mold. In this paper, I explore what the “ideal” body really is and why and how teenage girls are affected by it. Although teenage girls think they need to look like the ideal woman that is being portrayed by their friends on social media to belong in society, if we can simply support and show respect to each other the negative stigmas from the life long search of the ideal body will diminish.

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#Let Me Take a Selfie: Social Media's Influence on Teenage Girls

Alexis is a seventeen-year-old girl who has every social media account that is freely available to her. She spends hours daily scrolling through her accounts observing her friend's pictures and statuses, critiquing herself if she does not match up to what they look like and wishing she could look like them. This daily critique of her body has ill effects on Alexis. She never feels like she looks good enough, which causes her confidence and self-esteem to diminish. If these effects continue to impact her, then it can follow her into her college and even adult life, affecting her job and marriage. Starting as young as the preteens, girls are influenced by what their friends post and these long term effects can be seen in Alexis. These effects are nothing to take lightly because they can stick with them for their whole life. The influences that social media has on teenage girls is an ongoing struggle that will only get worse as the years go on and as technology and social media get more advanced. Teenage girls falling between the age of thirteen and nineteen are criticizing themselves based on what their friends look like and they want to do whatever it takes to look like them. This is damaging to teenagers because they will never be happy and content with their own body; they will always be striving to look like the ideal body that their friend has or at least what that friend shows on social media. Why does society make girls feel like they need to look like the ideal and what does that even look like? The ideal body that teenage girls are trying to achieve is the thin but curvaceous look, which they achieve with accessories such as the hottest hairstyle that is available, the latest fashion line of clothes, the best make-up, and the cutest accessories. Girls are in a non-stop competition to look better than their friends, or to look like the ideal friend who always looks fantastic in every picture on Facebook. Although teenage girls think that they need to look like the ideal woman that is being portrayed by their friends on social media to belong in society, if we can simply

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support and show respect to each other the negative stigmas from the life long search of the ideal body will diminish.

What exactly is the ideal woman?

Everybody's perception of the ideal woman can differ; however, there are common aspects to each version of the ideal body. For example, in Venezuela, the ideal woman is a little thicker and more curvaceous than those in France who are stick thin. But in the United States, the ideal body is that of a woman who is thin yet still curvaceous, like a combination between Venezuela and France. In a book concerned with figuring out what the ideal body really is, Dill talks about the ideal body and how common people see it. She performed a study on a group of eighteen-year-olds about their mental perception of what the ideal woman's body really is. The results showed, "the teens noted these common characteristics: provocative dress (ex. "tight clothes"), curvaceous figure (ex. "big boobs"), thin, sexual (ex. "sexy"), and aggressive" (Dill, 2009, p.105-106). These teens represent the whole population of the United States well because this is what society has come to today. This is the ideal woman's body that teenage girls are trying to achieve, even with their undeveloped bodies.

Another example of what the ideal body looks like is described by Tina Fey. Even though she is a comedian and this quote is humorous, it still has an important message and strongly suggests what the ideal body looks like in today's time. She says, "Now every girl is expected to have Caucasian blue eyes, full Spanish lips, a classic button nose, hairless Asian skin with a California tan, a Jamaican dance hall ass, long Swedish legs, small Japanese feet, the abs of a lesbian gym owner, the hips of a nine-year-old boy, the arms of Michelle Obama, and doll tits" (Fey, 2011). This quote shows that the ideal body is a complex combination of characteristics

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that embrace all kinds of races, ethnicities, and even of the different sex. How is a teenage girl supposed to achieve any of those, especially since her body has not even fully developed yet?

Society is forever changing; the ideal body for women is forever changing along with it. For example, Bess Myerson was crowned Miss America in 1945 with her body still being thin, but not as thin as today's society demands. In contrast, if she ran for Miss America today, more than likely she would not make it very far just because her body is not thin enough to meet the demands of society. It is crazy as well as scary to see what pressures society is putting on women. If they started out the Miss America pageants with thicker girls and they have slowly but surely decreased the sizes of the models, what is left to decrease? The models in today's time are already stick-thin, most probably with a low body mass index (BMI) that increases their health risks for diseases, so where will they go from there? How can they possibly get any smaller than that? Society is damaging teenage girls' lives because they are putting so much pressure on them to look a certain way and to act a certain way.

Teenage girls see this ideal body and these thin ideals every single day as soon as they open any social media app. Technology has advanced so much now that social media is available at their fingertips and at any given time they want it. This alone is enough to be damaging, however, the fact that these teenage girls are unconscious about just how much social media is affecting them is even more damaging. Most are frequently criticizing themselves based on what their friend's on social media look like. As a result of this constant critique of their body, a lot of teenage girls are finding ways to change their appearance and in some ways change who they are just to be able to fit in. On the website, Teen Ink, they are trying to tell just how much media can affect teenagers, even pre-teens. They offer some very valuable statistics that show just how many are affected and some of the things they do to try to fit in. The statistics show, "59% of 5th

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through 12th grade girls are dissatisfied with their body shape, 20-40% start dieting at age 10, and by [age] 15 girls are twice more likely to become depressed than boys” (Zazawish, n.d.). This shows that a 10 year old girl, for example, may feel she does not fit into society because of her weight; therefore, she feels the need to diet. There is nothing healthy about a ten year old dieting when her body has not even fully developed yet. The impacts that happen in preteens just intensify when they hit teenage years because they have more freedom over their body. To show just how many teenage girls diet, here is a statistic from the National Library of Medicine and National Institute of Health website, “Half of teenage girls, that is one in every two, are dieting because they want to change their body shape to look more like the ideal” (Paediatric Child Health, 2004). This number is way bigger than it should be; dieting as an adult can be dangerous, but dieting as a teen is incredibly dangerous to their health. It causes them to alter their body before it even has the chance to fully develop. An example of the impact that dieting has on a teenage girl’s body is described on a teenage health website:

During the adolescent years the body is still experiencing growth and development.

Interfering with this process through frequent dieting can have a detrimental effect on growth, damage organs and potentially cause death. Eating the wrong foods or cutting out the right foods can stunt growth, lead to depression, irrational behavior, tiredness and hyperactive behavior. (“Negative Effects”, 2015).

This claims shows just how big of an impact that dieting can have on a teenage girl’s body. All of these harmful effects are unnecessary and can be prevented. If we can spread the word about these effects and how it damages them as a teen as well as carrying over to adulthood, we can stop most of it from happening.

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What do Teenage Girls Post on Facebook?

In order to figure out exactly what teenage girls post on Facebook, I did a little research on my own Facebook account. I went through my friend list and I took the average of how all of my girl teenage friend's pictures looked. The youngest was fifteen and the oldest was nineteen. My sample size was 34. There were three different themes I noticed in the pictures. One is the above the shoulder picture, which included 18 teenage girls. The next is the edited type, which included 20 girls. Thirdly, is the whole body picture, which included 12 girls.

After gathering the data, I analyzed why each of these types got as much attention from the teenagers as they did. First, is the above the shoulder picture. Roughly 53% of my teenage friends included above their shoulders as their pictures to post on Facebook. This is a high percentage, so why did they choose this particular type? Most of them probably chose this type because they feel that their body does not fit into the mold that society has made for them. Dr. Terri Apter is a psychologist from Cambridge University; she claims, "We all like the idea of being sort of in control of our image and getting attention, being noticed, being part of the culture" (Sanghani, 2014). She is saying that people posts selfies, which are usually above the shoulders, because they can be in control of what they look like. They are aware that as soon as they post that picture on Facebook it is fair game for everyone to see and judge. Apter also says, "It's much easier to edit and control a selfie than a picture taken by someone else, you can make it look better" (Sanghani, 2014). Once again it is all about control and being able to choose how we look, a way in which we think we look the best and we want everybody that sees it to think that we look good too. This quote also leads us into the second category of photos, the edited ones.

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The edited photos included over half of my sample of teenage girls. My sample was limited to Facebook, and it is a lot harder to edit pictures on Facebook than Instagram. However, I am sure it is safe to say that everybody has edited a picture they have posted at least once in their social media “career”. Why do teenage girls edit their pictures? Why is their natural picture not enough? Dr. Apter also has a reason as to why teenage girls choose to edit their pictures. She says, “It’s their feedback, the only way you can count [how interesting you are] is by how many people like it – how many have retweeted or favourite it” (Sanghani, 2014). This shows that teenage girls see their self-worth in their pictures they post on Facebook, which is very sad. It is sad and damaging to the teens because they are trying to figure out who they are, and society has pressured them into believing that their worth lies within how many likes their pictures get on Facebook.

Are those pictures even really them? They edit the picture with all of these different types of filters that at some point the picture becomes someone else’s. For example, if I take a natural picture of myself with my red hair and greenish-blue eyes and I add a filter that turns my hair darker and makes my eyes an icy-blue, then the end product is not really me. I do not have icy-blue eyes or dark hair, but if I edit my pictures that way people will only see that version and believe I really look like that. If teenage girls want to rate their worth based on their pictures, the least they can do is post their natural picture. The reason that most do not post their natural picture is because they feel they do not fit into societies mold. Instead, they feel that to be able to rate their worth they need to use all of those editing apps that society has conveniently provided for them. This is a damaging cycle that will never end unless we stop with the editing. We need to start putting our real selves out there the way we are because we are all individuals and we are all different in our own way. Kate Winslett is already starting to push back. She recently made

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L'Oréal put in her modeling contract that they will not edit the pictures they take of her. She makes a statement about why she did this. She says, "It's a hope that other people might follow suit but it does feel important to me because I do think we have a responsibility to the younger generation of women" (Zhang, 2015). More people need to realize that change starts with us. We are the ones who have the power to prove to society that we can be our self and that is enough.

Thirdly, 35% of the teenage girls in my sample posted mostly whole body pictures. This is a high percentage that clearly opposes the above the shoulder, or the selfie pictures. As I was gathering the data, I took note of the body type of the ones posting the whole body pictures. All of the teenage girls except one would be considered to fit into society's mold of the thin body. This is an important note to take in because it could possibly be the reason why they do post full body pictures. They already feel socially accepted because of their body type, so they have no worries or concerns about posting the whole body picture. I am not suggesting that thin teenage girls do not struggle with their body image. I am just pointing out that most of the girls who posted the full body pictures were thin, so they more than likely feel comfortable enough with their body to post that type of picture on social media.

The results of my data indicate that social media has a huge impact on teenage girls' lives and what they post on social media. The fact alone that they feel the need to edit their pictures and measure their worth based on the amount of likes and shares they get is enough to damage any teen. Facebook, along with any social media site, will influence all teenage girls' lives as long as we let it. As of today, there are many problems that social media cause. Let's take a look at a few of them.

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The Big Problem

All of those things that teenage girls post and see on social media websites add up to aid in the negative stigmas and diminishing self-confidence of the girls. What is a girl to do without self-confidence? If they don't have self-confidence, it will affect all social aspects, including work, marriage, education, and possibly even health risks such as eating disorders. Some teenagers will have low or maybe even no self-confidence, and will avoid socialization among other teens at all costs. If they do not feel comfortable in their own body, then how will they be able to feel comfortable around other teens that have the thin ideal body that they want? An article by Fardouly and his associates offers yet another study on how Facebook specifically affects teenage girls. The article states, "Facebook mainly features images of one's peers . . . exposure to peers who closely match the thin ideal has been found to increase women's body dissatisfaction" (Fardouly et al., 2014, p.39). This information shows just how much of an impact that even the people we know can have on us. It is safe to say most people realize it may be a little hard to achieve the thin body a model has, but if you see a thin body on one of your friends on Facebook, then it becomes more realistic and in your mind easier to obtain. According to a teenage girl's response to my research questions on Facebook, she claims, "I run the 'shame game' logic through my head: 'She's gorgeous, I wish I had her hair/nose/skin/make-up, how does she have such a tiny figure, etc.'" (personal communications, November 1, 2015). This is a perfect example of how teenage girls compare and judge their own body and appearance to that of their friends' on social media.

In an article titled "Frazzled by Facebook", the authors include a study on women and their use of Facebook specifically. One question that was asked to the girls was, "Facebook usage causes me to feel stressed, [with a result of] 20.0%" (Thompson, 2012, p.94). This shows

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one way in which Facebook is a problem for teenagers because it carries into their adult life; it causes them stress, stress which can decrease their ability to perform well at work or school, increase marital stress, and increase the risk for an eating disorder. First, it will decrease the teenager's ability to perform well at work and school because she will be focusing on what she is not and how she can become like the "woman" she wants to be. It will increase marital stress later in life by causing tension between the couple. The wife is completely focused on her appearance and wanting others to perceive her as the ideal woman, while most husbands do not understand because they think their wife is perfect the way she is. That difference alone is enough to put stress on a marriage. Lastly, it increases the risk for teenagers to be diagnosed with an eating disorder. According to the National Association of Anorexia and Associated Disorders, "95% of those who have eating disorders are between the ages of 12 and 25.8. . . 69% of girls in 5th through 12th grade reported that . . . pictures influenced their idea of a perfect body shape, while only 5% of American females naturally possess the ideal body" (ANAD, 2015). This information and these particular numbers are really fascinating. Only 5% naturally have that ideal body, so what about the other 95%? What do they have to do to become that ideal woman? Some resort to adjusting their eating and their meals to lose weight, just to be able to change their body shape so they can fit into societies mold. Unfortunately, their eating adjustments may lead to eating disorders such as anorexia, bulimia, or binge-eating.

On top of all of the stress of forming themselves to fit into society's specific mold, there is another problem at hand; the problem of caring too much or not caring enough about their appearance. If teenage girls spend so much of their daily lives putting on make-up or worrying about every calorie they eat, then when do they have time for school, for homework? Changing your body is no easy task; it takes time and effort, which means it also takes time and effort away

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from other activities, such as school. It will also have effects in the workplace: do bosses really want their employees running to the bathroom to fix their hair and make-up every hour and not taking lunch breaks because they do not want to eat? Do employers want a woman that does not care a whole lot about her appearance and just comes to work natural and as God made her? This is where the dilemma comes in, if girls spend too much time worrying and changing their body and appearance then people in society sees them as self-centered and a show-off, even though society is the one who is pressuring them to act this way. On the other hand, the women who do not really care about their appearance get judged as well because they do not look like the ideal that society demands for success. So what is a girl to do? Society starts with the teenage girls, influencing them and drilling into their heads that they have to look thin and curvaceous with all of the hottest styles to be successful in life. This in turn sticks with those teenagers throughout their life when they are looking for a job, for example, and they feel that if they can look the ideal then they can get a good job because that is what the employers want. Sadly, it is a never ending cycle of give and take, of right and wrong, of finding the perfect spot in the center of that too much/ not enough scale for a teenager to feel like she belongs in society.

The Even Bigger Solution

Throughout this paper, the many problems social media can cause teenage girls have been pointed out and described. These include stress, early age dieting, eating disorders, and body dissatisfaction. All of these are huge problems not only to teenage girls now, but these ideas stick with them. Teenage girls carry these ideas throughout their whole life, resulting in a life-long, long-term effect. However, have no fear because there is a solution that will decrease, if not solve, these problems.

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One solution is that of simply supporting each other. Females get into the state of mind where they want to look like each other or look better than one another, and have all of the hottest hairstyles, clothes, and accessories that are available. Nothing about this competition is healthy. For example, imagine that a friend posts a picture on Facebook and she is thin with the cutest outfit and accessories. You are looking at the picture thinking she is just showing off and thinking you can look that good. If you are the friend that is critiquing yourself, then you need to stop and realize that you are your own person and show support. You should comment on the cute photo and say positive things, such as “you look really pretty in this picture”. If you are the friend that posted the picture then you should think about why you posted that picture. Did you post it because you felt pretty that day or did you post it because you really wanted to show off? If the reason is the latter, then you need to step back and show respect to others who will be influenced by that picture. I am not suggesting that girls should not post cute pictures. I am simply pointing out that it could be the intention behind it that can cause a positive or negative impact on the viewer. These short and simple thought processes before you post a picture or while you are viewing a picture on social media can show girls all over the world that it is okay to support one another; we do not have to be in a constant competition for looking the best and having the best name brand clothes and accessories.

The second solution is to show respect to each other. This goes hand in hand with the solution of supporting one another. Respect can be defined as “a feeling of deep admiration for someone” (Respect, 2015). I took the time to tell you the definition of the word respect because of the use of admiration. It points out that to respect someone you can admire certain aspects of them like their hair, clothes, or even body. However, what it does not state is that you compare yourself to them and you critique your own body because of the body that your friend has. To

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respect, you simply admire what that friend has. It is so easy to show respect when referring to posts on social media. For example, let's say you see a post from one of your friends that infer they are having a hard time with their weight or having financial problems that prevent them from buying certain clothes. All you would have to do is comment on that post and tell them that they are beautiful the way they are and that they should only lose weight if it is important to them personally, not because of the pressures of society. You could also tell them that they do not need the name brand clothes because the clothes they already have are cute. Showing respect to all teenage girls, especially, can decrease the risks of those long term influences that social media can have on them. It is so easy to show someone respect; just admire, don't judge yourself or them.

Lastly, we need to all realize that we are all individuals. Every single teenage girl goes through her own problems and has her own views on life. Since we are all individuals and are all different, then why do we all want to be the same? Why do we want to fit into the mold that society has made for us? I extended my audience on Facebook to tell them about the impacts social media can have on them. I also asked for their feedback on their own impacts by social media and I received some interesting comments. One teenage girl said, "I think most people think they have to look a certain way to get attention, but in my opinion I do not want to look like someone else because I am me" (personal communications, October 30, 2015). This statement is really strong and impacted me personally. She is one of few that understand that we are each individuals; we are all different. Therefore, we should all look different and it should be okay and accepted by society.

All of the solutions that have been presented need to be used simultaneously because once we understand we are all different, then we can accept the challenge of supporting and

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showing respect to other teenage girls and women on social media. Once we start supporting and respecting each other, that is when all of the impacts of social media can begin to decrease.

Teenage girls and women can start acknowledging that they are indeed their own person and it is okay to be different and it is okay to not have the ideal body that society throws in their faces on a daily basis. The sooner we start realizing this, the sooner we can get on Facebook and not be constantly comparing ourselves with our friends; we can get on Facebook and actually enjoy that time and feel good about our body when we close the app at the end of the day.

Conclusion

Coming back around to Alexis, the seventeen-year-old girl that we met in the beginning, she has had her struggles with social media. She has been influenced by it in so many ways. Some of these ways include getting on Facebook and seeing all of her friend's posts and pictures and judging herself based on how she thinks she measures up to the standard that society has set. She always finds herself posting "selfies", the kind of pictures that only show above the shoulders and she always finds herself getting the latest editing app so she can edit the photos before she posts them on social media. She feels that she needs to edit them before so she can look better than her natural picture, so she can fit into the mold that society has imprinted on her. This is a huge problem because it causes stress and long term effects that will impact her life, including her future work, education, or romantic relationships. Luckily, she knows people that are aware of the fact that social media influences you and wants you to look a certain way. This group of friends tells Alexis that she does not need to let social media influence her and it is very simple to make a change. They tell her that all she has to do is first believe that she is an individual, she is different, and she will never be able to be like someone else. Once Alexis

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realizes this, she starts showing respect and support for all of the other teenagers she sees struggling with social media's influence.

Every teenage girl needs to start with the basics, such as learning that they are their own person and they will have their own look and body type. This simple solution will not fix the fact that there is a huge industry that wants teenage girls to feel conscious of their body so they will buy products to "help" them look better. However, this solution is simple enough for every teenage girl out there to actually be able to feel more confident about their body. It will allow for girls to unite and come together to support one another when one is down. It will allow them to show respect for not only themselves but for other teens who struggle with confidence. Most importantly, it will allow for the confidence needed to diminish the urge to support all of the industries that want them to buy make-up, fashion, or weight-loss products. Hopefully, if we start simple then we can only make the world a better place by growing along with our self-confidence.

I received a response from a teenage girl on my Facebook post that I put on their for research purposes. She says, "I think anyone can transform into the best version of them if they choose to walk that path . . . they should have goals to aspire to, not molds to fit in. . . it [all] begins from the inside out" (personal communications, November 1, 2015). She is so inspiring; her responses to my questions were ruggedly honest. According to her, if we all just look within and see what is truly inside, we are all beautiful and that should be enough. All it takes is one person to realize the effects of social media and take the initiative to stand up and be your own person who supports and respects other teenage girls and women. Is that person going to be you?

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