

Body image

# Social media and celebrity culture 'harming young people'

Young people’s mental health damaged by ‘unobtainable’ body image in online world



Photoshopped images on social media have put pressure on young people to look ‘perfect’ in their online lives, the study says. Photograph: Aflo/REX/Shutterstock

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Airbrushed photographs of celebrities with perfectly preened bodies staged in exotic locations are all over social media, but such flawless images have been described as damaging for the way they pressurise young people to meet unobtainable body-image standards.

Most children own a smartphone by the age of 10, and this has in turn led to increasing pressure on youngsters to look perfect in their online lives, a study has found.

The youth charity YMCA spoke to more than 1,000 young people aged between 11 and 16. They found that 62% of 15 to 16-year-olds felt that social media had ramped up [expectations over their personal appearance](#). Photoshopped images and the sharing of only the most flattering shots shifted young people's understanding of what a normal body looked like, the charity said.



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Ideals of physical perfection were also said to be driven by celebrity culture, with 58% of 11 to 16-year-olds identifying it as the main influence.

Denise Hatton, the chief executive for YMCA England and Wales, said: "We've all been guilty of only posting our most flattering pictures on social media. While there's nothing wrong with wanting to show yourself from your best angle, it's important that we still like ourselves when we're not looking our best, which is probably the majority of the time for most of us."

[Social media](#) was already a concern among 11 to 12-year-olds, with 43% of those surveyed claiming individuals they saw on online influenced them.

The charity has joined Dove, the health and beauty products company, for its Be Real Campaign, which is asking people to sign up to its body image pledge, IPledgeToBeReal.

It urges social media users to stop editing their pictures and to hold brands and organisations responsible for not promoting healthy body images and diversity.



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Hatton said: "Today's beauty standard is completely unobtainable, leading us to constantly feel bad about our bodies and looks. This is particularly the case for young people and it can have serious effects on their mental and physical wellbeing.

"It's time to take back control of how we feel about our bodies

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and celebrate our real self so that everyone can feel confident in their body this summer and beyond.”

Increasing numbers of academic studies have found that mental health problems have soared among girls over the past decade, coinciding with the period in which young people’s use of social media has exploded.

Dr Bernadka Dubicka, the chair of the child and adolescent faculty at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, said last year: “There is a growing crisis in children and young people’s mental health, and in particular a gathering crisis in mental distress and depression among girls and young women.”

Dubicka said social media such as Snapchat and Instagram “can be damaging and even destructive” to girls’ mental wellbeing. “There’s a pressure for young people to be involved 24/7 and keep up with their peer group or they will be left out and socially excluded.”

Social media use has also contributed to a increasing sleep deprivation among young people, which could both be a symptom of mental illness and also raise the risk of it developing, she added.