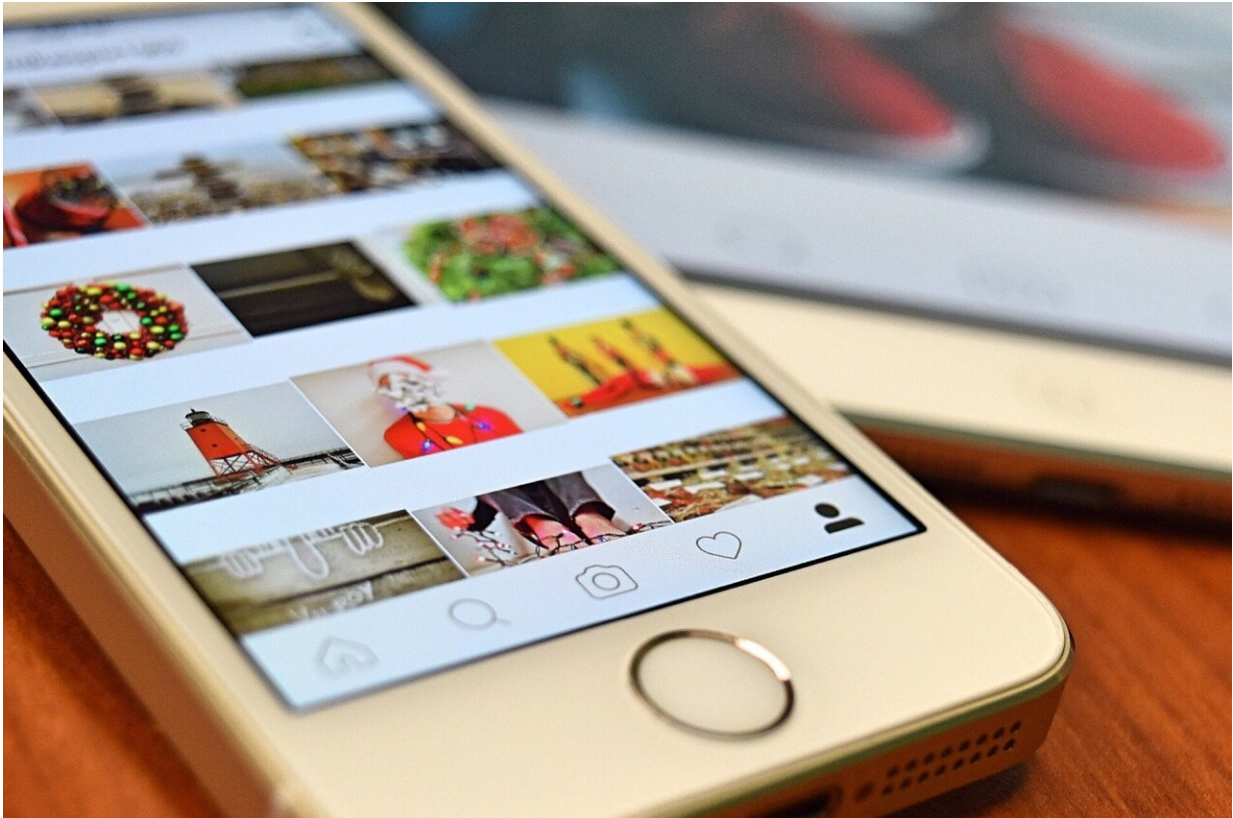


The cost of being 'liked' on social media

June 1 2021



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New doctoral research has found that vulnerable adolescent females are most likely to compare themselves negatively to photos on Instagram.

Nicole Gifford graduated from Massey University on 27 May with a Doctor of Clinical Psychology which investigated the impact the social

media platform has on [adolescent](#) mental health.

As a young Instagram user herself, Dr. Gifford started seeing the creation of social rules such as the amount of likes someone was gaining on their photos posted or the type of content posted.

"I started to see this distorted perception Instagram was creating of peoples' lives and the comparison of that. When looking at the literature, I found different people respond differently to Instagram and whether they compare themselves to others, so I wanted to understand who was most at risk of comparing themselves negatively to others on Instagram and the impact of that and if it was causing depression and worry in adolescents."

She wanted to focus on adolescents as she believes social media is ingrained in their lives from a young age, more so now than in the past.

According to the Ministry of Health's 2019/2020 statistics, 13.4 percent of women aged between 15 and 24 years in New Zealand suffer from an anxiety disorder, the highest it has ever been for this age group when comparing results from 2006 to 2020.

Statistics have also shown 12.6 percent of New Zealand women aged between 15 and 24 years were diagnosed with depression in 2019/2020, showing a continuing rise since 2006 and the highest they have ever been in 14 years.

Part of her research was administering a questionnaire across four high schools within the Auckland region. The questionnaire consisted of questions on demographics and Instagram use, measures to capture the personality traits and Instagram usage patterns of interest, as well as depression and worry. Across all schools 853 participant's answers across all ages and genders were collected.

The results from the survey showed adolescents who have two distinct personality traits, the first being a tendency to compare their abilities to others and the second having a low concept clarity (not understanding who they are) are more likely to compare themselves negatively to others on Instagram, and experience depression and worry symptoms.

Ms Gifford says when comparing genders, the results showed that vulnerable females experienced more dire outcomes than males, as comparing ones' abilities with others was only a risk factor for females and low self-concept clarity was a greater risk factor for females than males.

"The clinical implications I suggested from my research included educating adolescents about the implications of using social media, in particular around the use of impression management strategies and how they create a distorted perception of one's life e.g., people can manipulate their photos, choose to post only certain content and even stage their photos, which is not an accurate depiction of reality."

She says more research needs to be done on who the best role models are to portray this message to adolescents, but believes it needs to start with content creators who are creating altered content to gain popularity online. "I have seen a lot of influencers start to show the real sides of their life, who they really are and a lot of them talking about how they're only showing what you want to see. They are the ones leading the way and creating socially desirable standards that people want to live up to.

"I think it's important app developers are aware, and they try to update their apps so they're more beneficial; such as Instagram removing the amount of 'likes' that people can view, which is a really good step in the right direction."

Another suggestion Ms Gifford made was to encourage adolescents to be

selective on who they choose to follow on the platform and to unfollow people they may compare themselves negatively to. "Other research has shown if people are following strangers or Instagram influencers and they don't have any other information to incorporate into their perception of them, they can gain an unrealistic view of their lives.

"They don't know them outside of the platform, and in comparison if you're following your best friend or people you know in real life, you know what is going on behind the scenes, so I think it's also really important for adolescents to be selective on who they choose to follow."

She says the platform is ever evolving— when she began her research, the number of likes someone received on their photo was displayed publicly and in her final year of writing her thesis Instagram had taken this feature away. She believes further research needs to happen to help future generations cope with the pressures the platform can have on their mental health and identify factors that contribute with New Zealand's alarming [adolescent mental health](#) figures.

Currently Dr. Gifford is working as a clinical psychologist to provide mental health services for older people.

Provided by Massey University

Citation: The cost of being 'liked' on social media (2021, June 1) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-06-social-media.html>

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