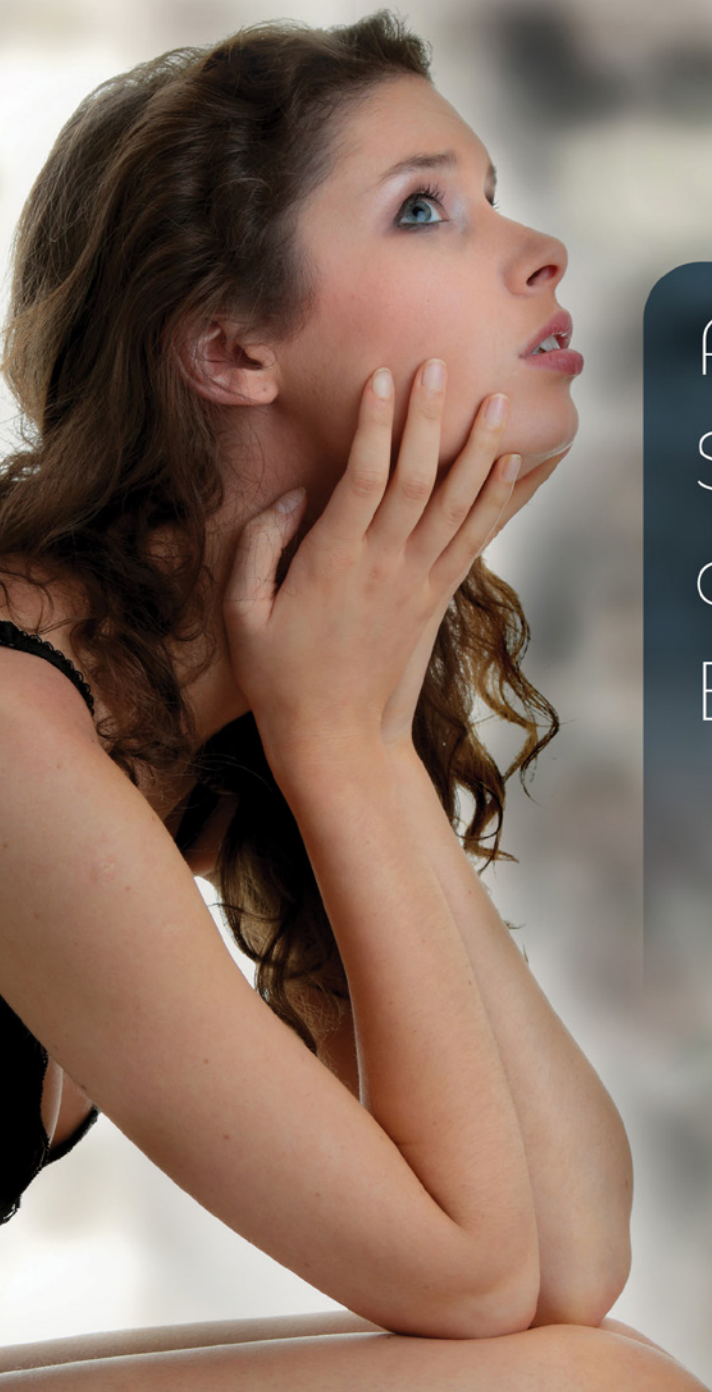


Challenges for Teen Girls



Anxiety,
Self-Image,
and
Bullying

Naomi Rockler



About the Author

Naomi Rockler is an author of nonfiction and fiction books for kids, an educational writer, and a former professor and instructional designer. She lives in Minneapolis with her husband, daughter, two cats, and a dog.

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Chapter Two

Social Media and Self-Image

“Look,” says sixteen-year-old Sasha as she scrolls through her Instagram feed. “See: pretty coffee, pretty girl, cute cat, beach trip. It’s all like that. Everyone looks like they’re having the best day ever, all the time.”¹⁸

Sasha might be looking at the Instagram page of a teen social media influencer, such as seventeen-year-old Sophia Castiblanco from Illinois, who has 379,000 TikTok followers and 221,000 Instagram followers. Castiblanco’s followers—whom she calls “besties”—can follow along as she shares her fabulous life—driving her new Tesla, shopping in downtown Chicago at Gucci and Dior, and riding her horse. Of course, she posts countless pictures of herself in adorable outfits with friends. As an influencer, Sophia is paid to advertise fashionable products, including prom dresses—which she modeled for an online bridal boutique, even though she is homeschooled and won’t be attending a prom.

Or Sasha might be looking at the page of a popular girl at her high school, posing in a bikini with nine or ten beaming friends on the beach, with hashtags like #HotGirlSummer. Or with nine or ten friends in tight dresses before the homecoming dance. Sasha doesn’t know if any of these girls are having problems at school or home, just that their lives certainly look better than hers.

Teen girls comparing themselves to idealized images is not new. During the 1990s, girls compared themselves to

models in *Seventeen* magazine or to Kelly's and Brenda's fabulous lives on *Beverly Hills 90210*. The difference today is that thanks to social media, teen girls have endless opportunities to compare themselves to "real" girls, including ones they know. "Social media can make it look as though everyone else's life is perfect," says Rae Jacobson, a writer at the Child Mind Institute. "Impossible standards can be set not just by celebrities and models but by classmates and friends curating and filtering their pictures."¹⁹ For many girls, it is challenging to look at this deluge of images and not feel bad about themselves or like their lives are lacking something.

The Pervasiveness of Social Media

For young people, the experience of growing up with social media sets them apart from previous generations. Social media did not become a staple of everyday life until the end of the first decade of the 2000s. Facebook began in 2004, followed by video-sharing platform YouTube in 2005, microblogging site Twitter (now X) in 2006, image- and video-sharing platform Instagram in 2010, "disappearing" video and photo app Snapchat in 2011, and short-form video-sharing app TikTok in 2016. Today, social media plays a significant role in teens' lives. According to a 2023 Pew Research Center study, about 46 percent of teens report being online almost constantly.

A 2023 Gallup poll found that teen girls between the ages of thirteen and seventeen use social media an average of 5.3 hours per day. Their most popular social media platform is YouTube (used by 91 percent of girls), followed by TikTok (68 percent), Instagram (66 percent), and Snapchat (65 percent).

Social Media and Positive Influences on Self-Image

Although social media can have a negative impact on teen girls' self-image, it is important not to dismiss the ways that social media can also have a positive impact. Whenever a new medium



Nearly half of all teens report being online almost constantly. Social media accounts for a large percentage of their use.

becomes popular—like radio during the 1920s, television during the 1950s, and the internet during the 1990s—exaggerated fears spread about the impact the medium will have on society, especially on youth, causing people to overlook some advantages of these media.

One way that social media has helped teens' self-image is by allowing them to find communities of like-minded people. Feeling different or like an outsider can be harmful to one's self-image, so when teens find others like them on social media, they often feel better about themselves. This includes LGBTQ teens and racial and religious minorities. Another way that social media can improve self-esteem is by giving teens an opportunity to make their own content that reflects their identities and interests. This can help teens feel more accepting of who they are.

In addition, although social media is full of images and messages that can make girls feel inadequate, other social media content is intentionally designed to help girls feel better about themselves. For example, the organization Amy Poehler's Smart

Comparison and the Instagram Senior Class Decisions Page

The Instagram decisions page offers a good example of how social media encourages young people to compare themselves to others. Many high schools have an Instagram page where seniors can post their senior photo and information about their immediate future plans. Most students post what college or tech school they have chosen, or they announce other plans, like joining the military or accepting a job. On the one hand, this is a useful way for students to share their plans. On the other, it can encourage students to problematically compare themselves to others. Students may feel bad if their own plans don't measure up. A student can see, for example, whether the college that rejected their application accepted their classmate's. In addition, like everything else on Instagram, students can like and comment on each other's posts. Although this is a nice way to show support, it is also an easy way to compare how many likes and comments everyone gets. Moreover, these posts also contain photos of students—many of which are professional or touched up—so students have yet another point of comparison.

Girls has TikTok and Instagram accounts with advice and positive messages for teen girls.

The Problem of Comparison

However, the positive messages girls encounter on social media do not negate the ways that social media threatens their self-image. According to Nakazawa, social media is harmful because it gives teen girls countless opportunities to compare themselves to others. “As humans, we constantly evaluate ourselves by seeing how well we stack up to others, gauging our own level of attractiveness, intelligence, social status, and success,” explains Nakazawa. “And the more time we spend trying to measure our social worth in this way, the more likely we are to feel dissatisfied and distressed about our lives.”²⁰

Renee Crotty, a junior at an Austin, Texas, high school, agrees. “Every scroll becomes more depressing; jealousy and compari-

son grows with each new post on your feed,” she says. “The constant struggle to be perfect and to fit the unrealistic standards placed on each of us affects a large amount of society, especially teenagers.”²¹

Girls compare themselves negatively in many different ways, but appearance and size is one of the most common points of comparison. So is perceived wealth. For many girls, social media leads to a fear of missing out (FOMO). Sometimes this is literal, like when a girl sees photos of peers at a party to which she was not invited. Other times, FOMO is a more general feeling that peers are all having amazing experiences—parties, vacations, friendships, romantic relationships—and that she’s missing out. Ava Faghani, a senior in Bethesda, Maryland, writes about how she obsessively watched videos of parties she wasn’t invited to on Snapchat. “I watched my peers live the life I envied from a seven-inch screen,” she recalls. “Peer pressure accentuated these feelings. I never felt the pressure to go out until I saw others doing it.”²²

“I watched my peers live the life I envied from a seven-inch screen.”²²

—Ava Faghani, high school senior

Comparison, FOMO, and Social Media Features

Social media comes with a number of built-in features that can trigger comparison and FOMO. For one thing, the most popular social media platforms that girls use (YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat) are all primarily visual. Social media platforms that are more text-based, such as Facebook or X, are not nearly as popular with teens. “Videos and pictures on image-based social media platforms can trigger intense episodes of self-comparison in . . . teen girls,”²³ explains journalist Jennifer Gerson, a reporter who writes about gender issues. There’s something about seeing pictures of girls having fun at a party, as opposed to just reading about them, that makes FOMO more visceral.

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