

Social Media and Body Image



How do teens' experiences on social media influence their body image? Today's teens not only have the ability to share their thoughts, their photos, and their personal videos, they also have 24-hour-a-day access to feedback from others. On social media, teens also have access to an endless stream of other people's pictures and posts — and let's not forget, often the most carefully selected and flattering snapshots of their peers.

Developmentally, it's no surprise that teens are lured by the appeal of peer feedback and the opportunity for social approval. But social media create unique challenges for parenting, particularly related to body image. Today's conversation case is about a college student named Stella and a photograph that she shared over social media, which ultimately received much more attention than she expected.

Key Vocabulary

Tumblr

Tumblr is a cross between a blog and Twitter: It's a streaming scrapbook of text, photos, and/or videos and audio clips. Users create and follow short blogs, or "tumblelogs," that can be seen by anyone online (if made public). Many teens have Tumblrs for personal use — sharing photos, videos, musings, and things they find funny with their friends.

post

A post is content — text, a picture, a link — shared online for others to see. Posts can take the form of "tweets" on Twitter or "status updates" on Facebook.

comments

Comments are another way of interacting with posts. Instead of (or in addition to) clicking a "like" button, people may choose to write their own comment related to the post.

likes

Many social media platforms include a "like" feature, often represented by an icon such as a heart or a thumbs up. "Liking" allows other users to respond to a particular post. Likes are a signal of attention and are used in a variety of ways: Someone might "like" a post because of the content, the person who posted it, or simply to signal they have seen it. Likes can also be a way to signal support, even in situations that do not seem at all likeable. For example, teens may "like" a post that says "RIP Jerome" not because they literally like that Jerome has passed away, but as a way to signal support or solidarity around the tragedy.

trolls

Trolls are people online who make inflammatory comments or upsetting statements for the purpose of starting fights or hurting others.

The Case

Humans of New York (HONY) is a project started by photographer Brandon Stanton. The blog includes photographs of people on the streets of New York City, and each portrait is generally accompanied by a quote from the person in the picture. The site now has more than 6,000 portraits and was also translated into a best-selling book.

In October 2012, Brandon shared the following post on the Humans of New York Facebook page:

Brandon: “Today I met an NYU student named Stella. I took a photo of her. Afterwards, she told me about a self-portrait she recently posted on Tumblr. So, instead of the photo I took, here is her self-portrait. Along with the words she wrote.”

Stella’s Text:

WARNING: Picture might be considered obscene because subject is not thin. And we all know that only skinny people can show their stomachs and celebrate themselves. **Well I’m not going to stand for that. This is my body. Not yours. MINE. Meaning the choices I make about it, are none of your ***** business.**

Meaning my size, IS NONE OF YOUR ***** BUSINESS.

If my big belly and fat arms and stretch marks and thick thighs offend you, then that’s okay. I’m not going to hide my body and my being to benefit your delicate sensitivities.

This picture is for the strange man at my nanny’s church who told me my belly was too big when I was five.

This picture is for my horseback-riding trainer telling me I was too fat when I was nine.

This picture is for the girl from summer camp who told me I’d be really pretty if I just lost a few pounds

This picture is for all the ***** stupid advertising agents who are selling us cream to get rid of our stretch marks, a perfectly normal thing most people have (I got mine during puberty).

This picture is for the boy at the party who told me I looked like a beached whale.

This picture is for Emily from middle school, who bullied me incessantly, made mocking videos about me, sent me nasty emails, and called me “lard”. She made me feel like I didn’t deserve to exist. Just because I happened to be bigger than her. I was 12. And she continued to bully me via social media into high school.

MOST OF ALL, this picture is for me. For the girl who hated her body so much she took extreme measures to try to change it. Who cried for hours over the fact she would never be thin.

Who was teased and tormented and hurt just for being who she was.

I’m so over that.

THIS IS MY BODY, DEAL WITH IT.”



The post received a lot of attention: More than 2 million people “liked” it, and the post elicited more than 170,000 comments. Some commenters praised Stella’s confidence, publicly affirmed her attractiveness, and declared their support for her decision to share the picture. Other commenters shared their disgust, asserted the dangers of obesity, and admonished supporters for celebrating Stella’s unhealthy lifestyle. The critical comments fueled a heated back-and-forth in the comments, and some of Stella’s supporters tried to publicly shame critics.

Here is an example of a comment that is critical of Stella:

“Shes not attractive. Shes unhealthy and overweight. Obesity is one the biggest epidemics facing the western world. Yes, we may bring it on ourselves but she is living with bad habits and to be this size at her age means they are likely to get worse. She should not be praised. She needs to excercise and diet. When she develops diabetes, heart disease, arthritis and other obesity related conditions its everyone else who has to pick up the pieces. Fat people are in the same class as smokers and drug addicts. Im not saying shes a bad person. Shes probably a lovely kind soul. But she needs to get a grip. And in her heart... she knows shes not happy.”

Here is an example of a poster refuting a critical comment and celebrating Stella’s decision to share:

“She is not promoting obesity! She is promoting self esteem in girls, young girls who see fake airbrushed photos in the media and think it’s the norm! You go girl. We are all different, unique and one of a kind, why should we all strive to be the same?”

Consider

- What is your immediate reaction to reading the story? What about the case is most surprising or noteworthy?
- What are the potential benefits to Stella of posting this picture on her Tumblr? Why do you think she wanted to share the image?
- What would you do if this were your child posting a similar picture and blog post like Stella?
- What about if it was your child who was responding and contributing to the comments section? Would it make a difference what type of comment they were posting?
- What are some of the different ways that social media impacts body image, even for teens who aren’t posting photos like Stella’s?
- What do you think of Brandon’s decision to leave the comments section open and not to delete the critical comments?
- What do you see as the “teachable moment” of this story?

The Case, Continued

Later, Stella posted on her personal blog about the experience. Here is part of her post, which she titled “On getting exactly what I wanted and feeling terrified.” <http://bit.ly/1bnc161>

I saw Brandon from HONY just down the block from where I live.

I was super excited, and approached him asking if I could get a picture of him. He was so nice, and agreed readily. I snapped him taking a picture of a young man in a wheelchair. He then asked me if he could take my picture. OF COURSE I agreed, anyone who knows me knows I love I having my picture taken.

After he took a few shots, he asked me “So what’s your story?”

I told him about my sizeism project, my blog, and the picture on tumblr that got a lot more attention than I thought it would. He said he was really interested, wanted to put me up on the blog, and to email him as soon as I got home with all my info. I did just that.

I expected him to post the CLOTHED picture of me, and link to my blog, so anyone who was interested could check it out.

So needless to say I was a little surprised when I saw my half-naked self on Facebook, getting thousands of likes every minute.

My first instinct was to burst into tears. It’s what I do when I’m too overwhelmed and don’t know how to feel. A million thoughts raced through my brain - but the most prominent one was

“This is exactly the exposure you wanted to spread the message of size acceptance. This is the perfect venue for you to share your story, and you should be honored.”

Then why did I feel like utter ****?

I knew that thousands of people were looking at my body. I knew thousands were judging me.

Still, I knew more were supporting me, sharing kind words, and getting something from what I wrote.

IT’S WAYYYYYY EASIER, however, to focus on the smaller percentage of negative ***** rather than the overwhelming love.

I panicked. I emailed Brandon, asking him to please post the other picture with a little more of what I had to say, as I thought maybe that would stop some of the trolls. I didn’t know how to feel. Here I was, this woman speaking about loving yourself and accepting who you are, suddenly absolutely devastated because some random people I don’t know were saying nasty things about me on the internet.

Brandon was amazing. He offered advice, his support, and told me if I ever changed my mind he would delete the picture.

I took a few hours with myself to sit and think and absorb what was happening. Should I tell him to delete it? Should I delete my blog? Should I persevere and leave it up?

Finally, I decided to leave it. I know what I am trying to do, which is help young women struggling with their body image and expose the hypocrisy and cruelty that is sizeism, is SO MUCH MORE IMPORTANT whatever feelings I may have about myself.

I didn't do this for attention or sympathy. I have people in my real life who help me with anything I need, I don't need to look to strangers for that.

I am doing what I'm doing in the hopes I can make a difference in a world that has so much cruelty.

But also know that I am human. I have my bad days. Maybe I will change my mind and decide I don't want to be in the public eye, and everyone will forget about me in about 2 seconds.

But I hope I continue to gain strength from this experience, and get the chance to tell my story at a widespread level.

Consider

- Does reading Stella's blog post ("On getting exactly what I want and feeling terrified") change anything about your initial reaction?
- Have you ever seen an example of "trolls" or "trolling" online? What was the experience like for you?
- What feels similar or different about talking to your children about hurtful speech online, as compared to offline?

Boonshoft, Stella. "On Getting Exactly What I Wanted and Feeling Terrified." *The Body Love Blog*, September 2, 2014.
<http://thebodyloveblog.tumblr.com/post/33895491646/on-getting-exactly-what-i-wanted-and-feeling-terrified>

Stanton, Brandon. 2012. *Humans of New York*, September 2, 2014.
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- **Ask your teens how they decide which photos of themselves to share.**

A perfectly curated online identity looks effortless. But in reality, people are intentional about what they share, and quite a bit of thought and effort goes into portraying a certain image. Invite your teens to think about a difficult day or day they felt unattractive — did they share it online? Why or why not? Can they recall a time when a friend shared a less-than-perfect photo? Consider opening up about your own process about what you post or don't post. What motivates all of us to share, or not to share, certain snapshots of our lives online?

- **Encourage your teens to view photos and comments online with a critical eye.**

There are two major ways social media can impact body image for teens. First, because teens see so many flattering pictures of others online, they may start to believe that everyone else always looks beautiful and perfect. The second way is through the feedback that teens individually receive about their photos. They may begin to believe what people say about them, or even develop insecurity when no one comments. Counter the perception that everyone else is always camera-ready by explaining how photos don't tell the whole story, may have been digitally altered, or simply may be taken out of context. Help your teens deal with online comments by asking questions about both the photos that they view and the feedback that they receive.

- **Praise your teen for things other than his or her looks.**

It may seem obvious, but you need to help balance the feedback teens receive online. It can be intoxicating to receive likes and positive reinforcement in response to a flattering picture. Try to focus your feedback on other aspects of your teen's identity — skills, hobbies, and interests. Encourage them to curate a positive digital footprint online by presenting an identity that is balanced and highlights their whole character.

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Digital Dilemmas are brief hypothetical situations and corresponding questions designed to foster cross-generational conversations about different aspects of adolescents' digital lives. Use this fictitious scenario, based on real-life stories, to spark a conversation at home with your children and open up the discussion about these very important topics.

4-3-2-1

Josh clicked open his Instagram app and saw the latest version of his grade's new favorite game. Someone would post pictures of four different girls on Instagram and others would vote for the most attractive by "liking" her picture. The girl whose picture received the fewest number of likes would be eliminated and pictures of the other three girls were reposted for another round of voting. The sharing and voting process would continue until there was a winner. Josh said that one of the 'worst' parts of the game was that the girls who lost might actually initiate another round of the game with a fresh set of girls, in the hopes of winning a separate version. Still, he didn't want to get involved. He knew that games like "Hot or Not" were popular in other schools, so he figured this was just his grade's version.

- 1 ? What is your gut reaction to this story?
- 2 ? How do the people whom you follow use Instagram?
- 3 ? Have you ever heard of anything like this happening on social media?
- 4 ? Do you think there is a difference between the kinds of pictures girls share of themselves and the kinds of pictures boys share?
- 5 ? What would you have done if you were in this situation?