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IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AND BODY IMAGE AMONG ADOLESCENTS

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ABSTRACT

Due to the evolving pace of technological advancements over the past few decades, increasing screen time on social media has become synonymous with the 21st century lifestyle, with social media acting as the main form of digital communication between individuals. Research suggests that there is an association with the COVID-19 pandemic and heightened social media usage, with the latter appearing to contribute to body dissatisfaction ideals and a strive for thinness in young adolescents. However, few studies have explored the effects of increased social media usage due to COVID-19 on body perception. Therefore, this study aims to explore the association between social media patterns during COVID-19 and changes in body image perception of adolescents. A cross-sectional survey with 200 respondents aged 14-18 in Bangkok, Thailand, was completed which measured social media usage, body image perception, eating habits and exercise patterns. The majority of participants were female (74%), aged 17 years old (63%), and the most frequently used social media app was Instagram, with 81.5% of participants reporting everyday use. Most participants (67.5%) were in the normal BMI range but showed a desire for shape modification (88%). Increased time spent on social media during COVID-19 was related to a clear internalization of the thin body ideal and weight-gain concerns, with 65.5% of users reporting a change in body perception post-pandemic. Participants became more preoccupied with eating and exercise habits they believed would help them achieve a thin body ideal similar to those they observed on social media. Results supported the hypothesis that increased social media usage under COVID-19 conditions acted as a driving force for worsening body image in adolescents. However, further research is needed to establish whether this is a long-term association or just significantly heightened during pandemic conditions as the sample size was quite small.

Keywords: social media, body image, COVID-19, teenagers