

Untested, Instagram's new teen safety measures may not work

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Credit: Matthew Modoono/Northeastern University

Instagram CEO Adam Mosseri faces Congress Wednesday armed with a slew of new safety features meant to protect younger users on the social media platform—a response to revelations that the company knew the

photo-sharing app can be toxic for kids and teens.

The [new safety measures](#) help users manage the amount of time they spend on the app, limit exposure to sensitive content and unwanted interactions for those 16 and under, and offer more parental oversight.

While these updates sound like a positive step, they're unhelpful without proof that they work, said Rachel Rodgers, an associate professor of psychology at Northeastern who studies social media's effects on [body image](#).

"I'm always interested in changes that are implemented based on data. The data we're reacting to is the clear observation that there are negative impacts. But it's not clear to me that there is any data supporting the fact that these changes are the ones that would be helpful," said Rodgers.

At 2:30 p.m. Wednesday, Mosseri is expected to testify before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety, and Data Security about the potentially harmful effects of the app on young Instagram users. The new safety features also allow teens to bulk delete old posts. Meta, which owns Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp, has come under scrutiny since a whistleblower disclosed internal research showing that Instagram can exacerbate body image issues for teen girls.

"After bombshell reports about Instagram's toxic impacts, we want to hear straight from the company's leadership why it uses powerful algorithms that push poisonous content to children driving them down rabbit holes to dark places, and what it will do to make its platform safer," said Connecticut Sen. Richard Blumenthal in a statement released before the hearing. Blumenthal, a Democrat, is chair of the subcommittee.

Christie Chung, a professor of psychology at Mills College, added that

the emotional echoes of negative online experiences can be felt long after a teen or younger user logs off. Northeastern announced a merger with the college earlier this year that will establish Mills College at Northeastern University in July 2022.

"I think the most important thing about going online is that at the very end, you remember how it makes you feel. You remember the emotion that you take away from that experience," said Chung, who studies emotional memories. "That's why it's so important to make sure, especially with [young people](#), that they have a positive experience."

Rodgers' research has shown that social media apps with a strong visual component such as Instagram or TikTok are more likely to feed into body image problems than apps such as Twitter, which is more geared toward text. And while there's not a lot of data showing what can counter those feelings, Rodgers believed it starts with the younger user.

"I think you need better dissemination of social media literacy, so helping young people to understand that these images aren't real, that they come with intent, so everybody's selling something and there are motives behind the images," said Rodgers.

"Also, we should teach them to understand the way that these platforms affect them, and then they'll be able to modulate the use of them appropriately. In other words, can they be aware of when they're getting tense or when they're going down a rabbit hole? Can they call themselves out and take a break?"

The Senate hearing comes as concerns about teenage mental health continue to make national headlines. U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy issued a [public health](#) advisory Tuesday warning of the mental health challenges facing young people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It would be a tragedy if we beat back one public health crisis only to allow another to grow in its place," Murthy said in the advisory.

Meanwhile, several state attorneys general continue their investigation into whether Instagram's parent company violated consumer protection laws by promoting the app to young users knowing its use is associated with poor body image.

"I think the [negative impacts](#) on body image are pretty much undeniable, at this point," said Rodgers. "But I think we can mitigate them, and I don't think the burden should be placed on society to educate young people. I think we need a multi-pronged approach, and we need to look at ways of making these platforms less appearance-focused."

Provided by Northeastern University

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