

- Social networking

Strong link seen between adults with body image issues, social media

These people are more likely to spend 3 hours daily or more on TikTok, Instagram: Study

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Social media manager Sarah (not her real name) keeps muted all notifications from her personal social media accounts for fear something online will trigger a relapse of her eating disorders. A random post on social media can send the former ballerina and gymnast down a “rabbit hole” of stalking skinny girls for two hours before she catches herself “in time”, said the 25-year-old Singaporean.

The link between adults with body image issues and social media use is one key finding of a poll published last week.

It found that adults at risk of being anxious about their body image are more likely to spend three hours or more daily on social media platforms TikTok and Instagram.

On average, those aged 16 and above spend two hours and 30 minutes each day on social media, the poll found.

The nationwide study by survey firm Milieu Insight polled 2,670 people in May and June 2022.

It found that nearly 20 per cent of adults are potentially at risk of body image anxiety – and they tend to be female and aged 16 to 24.

Milieu Insight scored respondents using the Appearance Anxiety Inventory assessment scale – an established psychometric assessment in psychology.

Those anxious about their body image were also more likely to be influenced by celebrities, particularly Korean personalities and social media influencers.

Social media can be an inspiration board, said Sarah, who has struggled with anorexia and bulimia since she was 14.

She said she would look at image sharing websites Pinterest and Tumblr as well as an online pro-anorexia forum that allows users to share information, including calorie counts and target weights.

Hashtags – which help group together related user-generated content – created by people with eating disorders helped her find weight loss content, prolonging her condition.

Three social service agencies said online platforms are a key trigger for body image anxiety among young people.

One agency said it observed suspected eating disorders in a growing number of young men who tried to keep fit during the circuit breaker.

Touch Mental Wellness assistant director Andrea Chan said: “These males usually follow fitness instructors online before exercising obsessively and showing off photos of their body on social media.

“Then they start to manage their diet and it’s a slippery slope from there.”

She and her colleagues have handled a rising number of cases involving eating disorders and body image, with half of the 18 cases in the past four years reported last year.

“Sometimes they don’t realise their condition because they start off wanting to be fit and healthy. But then they get caught up with the lifestyle such that they never look good enough to themselves,” said Ms Chan, who has 10 years of counselling experience.

Ms Lena Teo, director of Care Singapore, said she was not surprised that those who spend more time on TikTok and Instagram feel more anxious about their appearance, as videos and images that propagate unrealistic body types and beauty standards can evoke negative feelings among the young such as anxiety, insecurity and envy.

“More psychological education has to be done to help equip youths to deal with technology. In our parenting workshops, we’ve noticed a lot of parents still playing catch up on the dangers of the digital world,” she said.

Social comparison has become easier as these platforms tend to recommend content that a young person repeatedly searches for, which might not be healthy, said Mr Eric Sng, head of Shine Children and Youth Services’ mental health programme Resil!ence.

Having healthy role models and mentors are therefore important to combat pressures from social media, said Shine social work associate Nuraidah Mohd Saleh.

In response to queries, a TikTok spokesman said the platform is focused on protecting the well-being of users by removing content, including hashtags, that promote unhealthy eating behaviours or habits that are likely to cause adverse health outcomes.

It also provides access to resources and support.