

Facebook has kept internal research secret for two years that suggests its [Instagram](#) app makes body image issues worse for teenage girls, according to a leak from the tech firm.

Since at least 2019, staff at the company have been studying the impact of their product on its younger users' states of mind. Their research has repeatedly found it is harmful for a large proportion, and particularly teenage girls.

"We make body image issues worse for one in three teen girls," said a slide from one internal presentation in 2019, seen by the [Wall Street Journal](#). "Thirty-two per cent of teen girls said that when they felt bad about their bodies, Instagram made them feel worse," a subsequent presentation reported in March 2020.

Another slide said: "Teens blame Instagram for increases in the rate of anxiety and depression. This reaction was unprompted and consistent across all groups."

Comprised of findings from focus groups, online surveys and diary studies in 2019 and 2020, the Instagram research shows for the first time how aware the company is of its product's impact on the mental health of teenagers. And yet, in public, executives at [Facebook](#), which has owned Instagram since 2012, have consistently downplayed its negative impact on teenagers.

As recently as March, Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's chief executive, claimed social media was more likely to have positive mental health effects. In May, Adam Mosseri, who is in charge at Instagram, said he had seen research suggesting its effects on teenagers' mental health was probably "quite small".

In a "mental health deep dive", marketing and product design executives and data scientists at Facebook concluded that some of the problems, such as "social comparison", were specific to Instagram and not replicated by other platforms.

"Aspects of Instagram exacerbate each other to create a perfect storm," said one internal report, which said pressure to share only the best moments and to look perfect could pitch teenagers into depression, low self-esteem and eating disorders.

Among the most concerning findings was that among users who reported suicidal thoughts, 13% in the UK and 6% in the US traced them back to Instagram. Another transatlantic study found more than 40% of Instagram users who reported feeling "unattractive" said the feeling began on the app; about a quarter of the teenagers who reported feeling "not good enough" said it started on Instagram.

Facebook’s internal conclusions echo a number of studies that implicate social media in an epidemic of [mental health problems among young people](#). In 2017, YoungMinds and the Royal Society for Public Health published research [singling out Instagram](#) as having the most [negative impact on young people’s mental wellbeing](#) of all social networks. Emma Thomas, the charity’s chief executive, said that while social media could be beneficial, it also came with increased pressures.

“Being surrounded by constant images of the ‘perfect’ life and seemingly perfect bodies can also have a big impact on how you feel about your own life and appearance, and it can be really hard not to compare yourself to others,” Thomas said.

A spokesperson for [5Rights Foundation](#), which campaigns for changes to digital services to make them more suitable for children and young people, said: “Facebook’s own research is a devastating indictment of the carelessness with which it, and the tech sector more broadly, treats children.

“In pursuit of profit these companies are stealing children’s time, self-esteem and mental health, and sometimes tragically their lives ... This is an entirely human-made world, largely privately owned, designed to optimise for commercial purposes – it does not have to be like this. It is time to optimise for the safety, rights and wellbeing of kids first – and then, only then – profit.”

Facebook declined to comment, but sent the Guardian a link to a [blog post](#) by Instagram’s head of public policy, Karina Newton. She said the WSJ story had “focused on a limited set of findings and casts them in a negative light”.

“Issues like negative social comparison and anxiety exist in the world, so they’re going to exist on social media too,” Newton said. “That doesn’t change the fact that we take these findings seriously, and we set up a specific effort to respond to this research and change Instagram for the better.”

Source: [Facebook aware of Instagram’s harmful effect on teenage girls, leak reveals](#)