The good, the bad, and the ugly: Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on emerging adults' body image

Sierra L.P. Tulloch, Devon J. Chazan, Gabrielle N. Pelletier, & Lia M. Daniels

Background

- The pandemic curated novel experiences for many people, including: social isolation, videoconferencing, and inaccessibility to health care and physical wellbeing services.
- Early researchers warned of the pandemic's negative influence on mental health, self-care, health habits, and body image.
- Given the large impacts and diverse testimonials, it was important to explore the perspectives of emerging adults and their body image during the pandemic.

Methods

- Emerging adults (**18-25 yrs**) were asked to complete an online survey on body image, videoconferencing, and health habits during the spring of 2021.
- **253** participants were asked the open-ended question "what has been the pandemic's greatest impact on your body image?" to explore their lived experiences about their body image during the pandemic. (*M*age=21.6; 82.2% women, 13.4% men, 2.1% non-binary, 2.3% did not disclose).
- We conducted an *inductive thematic analysis* on all participant responses.





Contact info: stulloch@ualberta.ca *References available upon request.* "Feeling like I need to be like everyone else on social media, working out at home, starting a home gym whatever else it may be I feel the pandemic has made society worse for social media 'body images'..." "Working from home has allowed me to set up a schedule that includes more regular exercise and less eating out."

The pandemic was a **double-edged** sword for emerging adults' body image.

"It made me realize there are more important things in my life than just my body. I typically eat healthy and I am quite active. I do not care too much if I look fat or anything. That's a problem for future me. " "I notice that video conferencing has made me notice how prominent my jaw is, which I never thought about much before this year."

"I have gained a significant amount of weight... and all of the clothes I used to wear that made me feel like myself no longer fit, so I don't feel capable of expressing myself the way I used to. "

"My preferred forms of physical activity are swimming and team sports... don't have the motivation for many other forms of exercise... I feel really out of shape."

"I think I am all for body neutrality rather than body positivity. During the past year my body has gotten me through a pandemic. As long as I am healthy and active I can't really care what my body looks like."

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Results

1) Social Media

- Positive Community
- Social Comparison

2) Eating

- Preparing meals at home
- Binge and/or boredom eating

3) Physique Changes

- Lost or gained weight, strength, and/or mobility
- Clothing does not fit anymore

4) Exercise

- Gym closures and no sports
- More time active outside
- Less commuting

) Thinking Time

- Self-exploration and compassion
- Rumination and overthinking body image
- Shifted mindset

6) COVID Niche

- Systemic problems (doctor appointments, financial instability, etc.)
- Masks (acne, hiding face, etc.)
- Videoconferencing appearance
- Post-pandemic worries

7) Body Neutrality

- Not realistic to love everything about yourself
- Body image fluctuates every day
- Body image as a journey

Discussion

- Although "good" and "bad", the pandemic created an experience for emerging adults to reflect on their body image and the corresponding influences of how they felt in their own skin.
- Researchers and clinicians should consider ways in which they can help those who may have had more difficult experiences with body image during the pandemic and the complex nuances of what body image means post-pandemic.
- Body neutrality in the context of change, crisis, and/or stress is an area of research that is worth further investigation (i.e., its protective factor may give emerging adults some peace of mind).





