

Olivia Sopeland's winning essay:

There is so much negativity in our generation, and social media is one of the largest feeding grounds for it. When I think of social media influencers, rarely do I begin to think about how they have positively impacted young minds with their good morals and generosity. They set rigid beauty standards for young adults, making teens feel inferior.

May 29, 2020, was the day that social media broke me. The COVID-19 lockdown had recently started. The weather was starting to get warmer, the kind of heat where it feels like someone's blowing a hairdryer on your face.

This signaled the beginning of swimming season in Arizona. But this year felt different; I didn't feel the usual excitement to breathe the fresh summer air and take a dip in the pool to escape the heat. I had recently been diagnosed with PCOS, a thyroid and hormonal condition. PCOS has many symptoms, but there was only one I was concerned about – my weight.

In a span of six months, I had gained nearly 50 pounds. I would stand staring at myself in a swimsuit, debating if I wanted to walk out to the pool to swim with even just my family. My stretch marks and skin rolls had nowhere to hide. My cute summery bikinis and tank tops that I had once loved now made me feel insecure and ashamed.

I spent most of my spare time mindlessly scrolling through social media, seeing gorgeous thin girls wearing itty-bitty bikinis on their personal yachts; it made my heart ache. I read articles about their lifestyles, diets and workout routines. I scrolled through their comments upon comments, worshipping them for physical qualities that I didn't possess.

I researched dieting tips to help me look more like them. Unfortunately, the fastest dieting tip wasn't the healthiest one, because there wasn't much food involved at all. This rapidly unfolded into an uncontrollable habit. That day I decided to go for a run with only a protein shake in my system. I often did this when I felt my lowest. After a large, heaping serving of insecurity from looking at social media stars, I was fueled up for my run. About 30 minutes into my jog I ended up on the hot asphalt crying – contemplating the choices that brought me to this street corner.

Social media was hurting me mentally and physically.

We are in a time of ever-changing beauty standards, from the body types of runway models with slim figures and long legs, to hourglass figures with implants, liposuction, large busts and basically any plastic surgery you can imagine.

We live in a world where women's body types are trends. Where one day a body figure is "in" and the next they are considered out of style. Body types shouldn't be something that goes in

and out of fashion. Social media is a driving force for our internal self-loathing monologues. We have lost sight of what is truly important.

Internal beauty far outweighs our fleeting external beauty. Social media and its addictive, drug-like effects blind us from what's important. We aren't defined by our looks, and our worth doesn't lie in our facial features or how our body looks from a certain angle.

We've let others determine beauty's definition. Who decided small noses and waists are beautiful but not stretch marks and acne scarring? Not only do the effects of social media harm our minds, it can affect the way we take care of our bodies.

According to Eating Disorder Hope, "Exclusive statistics have revealed that in the past three years the number of children and teenagers searching for help for an eating disorder has risen by 110 percent." What causes this sudden surge? According to another study done by Polaris Teen Center, 69 percent of females (ages 10 to 18) state that photographs of models and celebrities in the media motivated their "ideal" body shape.

Social media is leaving a significantly negative impact on our generation.

The effects of social media can't easily be fixed, but I believe we can all work to support our generation in the fight regarding mental health. Everyone struggles with their appearance, and we are all broken people.

But positivity on social media can impact someone and patch up the holes within their soul. I hope that my story can one day speak in someone else's heart and give them hope and comfort, knowing that you can grow past your insecurities and live in the truth that social media doesn't define you.