

The world has become increasingly digital, and social media platforms such as Instagram can blur the line between reality and fake. Recently, there has been a public suggestion to regulate influencers and content creators who use software such as Photoshop or alternative editing programmes to distort images on social media. This suggestion stems from unrealistic yet convincing images of bodies and faces causing a rise in self-esteem and mental health issues surrounding body image. Edited images present an unrealistic and unobtainable body shape, and cosmetic alterations encourage unrealistic beauty standards and reinforce existing stigmas. Individuals diagnosed with genetic conditions become bombarded with images of 'perfect' bodies and skin, increasing anxiety and low self-esteem. The World Health Organisation (WHO) suggests that "society, not psoriasis, causes the exclusion and discrimination faced by people with this disease", and this needs to be communicated to the general public for all medical conditions to be accepted and recognised.¹

This article explores how stigma related to skin conditions and mental health-related issues can change through positive representation in the media and arts.

One method to destigmatise skin conditions is through focused media and visual campaigns that educate society on the cause, cures and treatments for conditions, to encourage acceptance. A report published by the WHO in 2016 "recognises the urgent need to pursue multilateral efforts to raise awareness regarding the disease of psoriasis and to fight stigmatisation" that many individuals are exposed to in their everyday life.¹ The stigma and discrimination many individuals suffer are often in

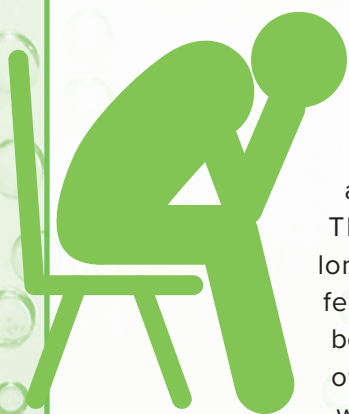
the form of social and work-related activities, such as swimming and other activities that involve public visibility, which exacerbate anxiety and low self-esteem.

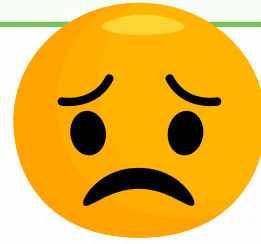
These environments cause loneliness and anxiety around feeling excluded and isolated because of other people's lack of understanding, especially when they are uneducated on



conditions like psoriasis. To help destigmatise and educate society on illnesses, governments should use varied methods, including social media, to reach a diverse audience.

A display included in the Wellcome Collection's Being Human permanent gallery in London explores how skin conditions are used as inspiration to create expressive artwork. The artwork installation entitled *Medical Heirloom – Acne; Osteoporosis; Cancer; Psoriasis; Ichthyosis (2007-11)*, by the artist Tamsin van Essen, features slip cast jars where the "surfaces and shapes of these vases each suggested a different health condition that can be inherited", such as acne, brittle bones from osteoporosis, rapid cell division causing cancer and flaky skin from psoriasis.² Tamsin van Essen is a ceramic artist who explores "notions of beauty and impermanence through examining scientific, medical and social historic themes".³ This artist explores these conditions through the metaphor of inheriting a family vase in the same way we can inherit genetic health conditions. In some ways, this piece suggests that while we may not want the family vase, we inherit it without choice and learn to live with this object in our everyday lives. It also explores the link between visual art and dermatology, recognising patterns in skin conditions can help early diagnosis and help individuals destigmatise these conditions through visual learning. Furthermore, forms of artistic expression could help an individual come to terms with and understand their condition more deeply by creating unique and beautiful artwork.





A study by the University of London investigated the impact of social media on pressuring women to change their appearance and how they perceive themselves. The study involved 175 18-30-year-old women and non-binary members of the UK general public. The research discovered that 75% of those involved in the survey have spent ten minutes creating and editing a photo before posting it on social media, with the most common answers being 'to even out skin tone', 'to brighten skin' and 'to make teeth whiter'.⁴ The results of this study emphasise the growing pressure many people in society experience from the continual unrealistic environment created by social media and how this can increase feelings of depression, anxiety and low self-esteem. Moreover, many participants in the study highlighted the lack of representation of young people with disabilities, with seven out of ten disabled participants feeling that their "body and appearance will never be good enough". Over 50% expressed feelings of depression, lack of self-confidence and feeling "invisible" and "hidden from view" regarding edited images in the media. Participants suggested that "there's not much correct representation of people with mental health problems" and personal experiences of daily activities and healthcare that have media focus are "often different to the media's representation". One concluding point emphasised the need for "bolder, more creative and more imaginable ways forward" than taking personal responsibility for the media we consume and deconstructing damaging representations in media. Therefore, if media is

constantly present in our daily activities, then we need to create a safe, representative and less judgemental space on social media. This could include enforcing media regulations that ensure the owner clearly states an image has been edited, and target cosmetic companies that use socially constructed standards of skin, body and lifestyle 'imperfections' as a marketing tool.

In conclusion, the use of arts to help understand and educate society on health and skin conditions could be beneficial through normalising the visual symptoms of these conditions. This visual normalisation could help individuals with skin conditions feel accepted within social settings through increased visibility of the physical signs of these conditions. Self-expression and visibility of unedited images and artistic thought create education opportunities and heightened awareness of realistic skin and body images.

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