

Small exposures to body positive content can improve body image

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Viewing body positive posts on social media can help reduce harmful appearance comparisons. Credit: Unsplash.

A small break from the barrage of posts on social media reinforcing societal beauty standards can make a difference to body satisfaction, according to new UNSW Sydney research. The study, published in the

journal *Body Image*, shows that following social media pages celebrating different body sizes, shapes, colors and abilities—or "body positivity"—can help improve young women's body image in everyday life.

Researchers from the School of Psychology, UNSW Science, tested whether viewing just a few body positive [social media](#) posts a day could positively impact [body satisfaction](#) and appreciation. In other words, could seeing a range of messages challenging unrealistic beauty ideals and promoting body acceptance at every shape and size help participants feel more secure about their bodies?

They found women aged 18–25 who viewed body positive posts daily over a 14-day period reported a decrease in body dissatisfaction and less tendency to compare their appearance with others. Their improvements in [body image](#) were also maintained four weeks after viewing the content.

The lead author of the study Dr. Jasmine Fardouly says the study shows how body positivity on social [media](#) can help reduce harmful comparisons and challenge unhealthy beauty standards.

"A very brief intervention over a short time where young women viewed a small number of body positive posts among the social media content they're regularly viewing was able to improve body image and reduce body comparisons," Dr. Fardouly says.

With the sheer amount of time spent on social media alone—the 159 participants in the study reported spending an average of two hours on Facebook on a regular day—even a small change in use can have a large impact.

"Body image is a huge issue globally. So, we need to try and improve

people's body image, especially through social media, where a lot of people spend their time and from a young age are flooded with societal beauty ideals," Dr. Fardouly says.

Body dissatisfaction in society

Body dissatisfaction is especially prevalent among young women and can seriously affect mental health.

"Being unhappy with your body is a risk factor for many mental health disorders. It's an important predictor of eating disorders and depression and is also linked to some anxiety disorders," Dr. Fardouly says.

Most young women around the world use social media. Content on social media that depicts unrealistic beauty standards is, at least in part, responsible for high rates of body dissatisfaction.

"It places a lot of pressure on [young girls](#) to look a certain way, at a time where the importance of peer acceptance and of being attractive to prospective romantic partners is salient," Dr. Fardouly says.

But beauty ideals are promoted throughout society to kids from a young age. Think about the archetype of a Disney princess, which many young girls look up to, Dr. Fardouly says. With very few exceptions, they present a narrow depiction of body proportions and beauty, not to mention other gender and cultural stereotypes.

"Kids as young as six report body image concerns. Young girls, in particular, say things like 'I need to be thinner' and report dieting to lose weight," Dr. Faroduly says. "Social media is the newest place where these beauty ideals are disseminated, promoted and reinforced. While the ideals are not new, they're intensified because of these platforms."

Viewing curated, edited or enhanced images of young women who match narrow societal beauty ideals on social media can increase body dissatisfaction among [young women](#). Users compare their appearance to the women in those images and judge themselves as less attractive.

"There's a lot more opportunity to compare to others and internalize narrow societal appearance ideals," Dr. Fardouly says. "But when we're comparing via social media. We're not seeing the complete representation of someone; we only see their most ideal side."

Instead of celebrating clear skin, shiny hair and tiny waists, the body positive movement aims to challenge unattainable beauty standards. The content promotes acceptance of all bodies and encourages a focus on function and health rather than physical appearance.

"We need to see bodies of different types, shapes, sizes and colors to be able to challenge society's beauty ideals," Dr. Fardouly says. "As the study shows, seeing this content is a way to make social media a less harmful environment for body image."

Body positivity on social media

The study's findings are consistent with previous research on the [effects of viewing positive body content on social media](#). The research, co-authored by Dr. Fardouly, found brief exposure to such content on Instagram improved women's body satisfaction and mood.

"We see this strategy as a micro-intervention—a small change we can make to improve people's experiences on social media and how they feel about themselves in everyday life," Dr. Fardouly says. "In the current study, just one post a day was potentially enough to induce positive effects. More exposure may be even more effective."

Interestingly, another group of participants in the study viewing appearance-neutral posts—content unrelated to a person's looks—also reported a decrease in body dissatisfaction.

"Even viewing appearance-neutral content on social media appears to be beneficial for body image," Dr. Fardouly says.

Other intensive interventions, such as 'detoxing,' can also be effective and boost our well-being. But they are unlikely to be implemented en masse for long periods, particularly by adolescents.

"It's very unrealistic to expect that adolescents will stop using social media altogether, so it's not an effective long-term strategy. Social media isn't going away. But as we've shown, it's also not really the time you spend on it, it's what you're doing when you're on it," Dr. Fardouly says.

As social media platforms become more image and video-based, Dr. Fardouly says it's even more critical for people to see content that accurately reflects the diversity of appearance in society.

"Platforms could incorporate more diversity into their algorithms. They can choose to put more body positive content into people's feeds and promote it more prominently," Dr. Fardouly says.

Although the findings are promising, Dr. Fardouly says more research should investigate what types of body positive content best impact women's body image.

"We need to be critical of the content presented under the guise of body positivity. The quality does vary considerably, and we don't yet know enough about the specific composition of the content that is needed to have positive effects—it's something future research should continue to explore," Dr. Fardouly says.

More information: Jasmine Fardouly et al, Can following body positive or appearance neutral Facebook pages improve young women's body image and mood? Testing novel social media micro-interventions, *Body Image* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2022.12.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2022.12.008)

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