



Body image and women's wellbeing

Exploring body image and wellbeing among female Instagram users

THE QUICK READ

Understanding the impact of Instagram on how women feel about their bodies is important for understanding how body image affects physical and mental health. It can also help us better inform future interventions.

Previous research, summarised here, suggests that messages on social media can be used to communicate positively about health. But the impact of such messages on users is not always clear.

Our findings show that:

- there is a link between **how women feel about their bodies and how satisfied they feel** with their lives as a whole;
- exposure to **images promoting unrealistic body ideals** correlates with **reduced life satisfaction** in female Instagram users;
- viewing any form of **message or distractor image** may help to **prevent this reduction in wellbeing**;
- we need to **gain a deeper understanding about online interventions** and whether targeting body image can positively impact broader wellbeing.

The role of social media

Instagram is a social media platform where users can upload and share visual content. It has come to play an intrinsic role in the lives and identities of its users, with many using it to digitally curate how they represent themselves online. Over 70% of users are aged 34 or under¹.

Instagram users report:

- valuing preferable rather than realistic displays of physical attractiveness (Baker et al., 2019);
- exaggerating their own physical attractiveness and happiness online (Pounders et al. 2016);
- linking Instagram trends to their perceptions of attractiveness (Davies et al 2020).

The promotion of unrealistic and sometimes competing body ideals on Instagram has been linked to increase in negative body image outcomes for women (McComb & Mills 2021).



Photo Tyler Nix via Unsplash

What do we mean by body image?

Body image is a construct describing our perceptions of and attitudes towards physical appearance, which are guided by our beliefs surrounding attractiveness (Cash, 2004).

Positive and negative body image are not two opposing ends of a single continuum, but represent different multifaceted constructs (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015).

Body image is broadly experienced and conceptualised differently between men and women (Grogan, 2006) and was therefore treated as separate in this study.

Popular body image terminology

Body image influences on Instagram are numerous and can contain competing messages. These include:

- **THIN-IDEAL:** a glorification of thin model-like bodies, a popular theme in media portrayals of desirable women.
- **FITSPIRATION:** exercise-themed images of women with fit and toned bodies. Through a guise of health promotion, fitspiration has been associated with unhealthy messages surrounding weight, diet and exercise.
- **SLIM-THICK (or thicc):** promotion of a curvier body type characterised by a thin waist, flat stomach but with curvier butt, breasts and thighs. While supposedly more inclusive of larger body sizes, this trend still promotes a very specific ideal, one which encourages an unrealistic expectation for curves in the absence of fat.

1 The current demographic stats from <https://www.hootsuite.com/resources/digital-trends> = 70.1% users are aged 34 or under. As of 2022, the majority of Instagram's audience are Millennial or Gen Z users, with it being the latter's preferred platform.

Body image and wellbeing

Research has linked body image to a range of different wellbeing outcomes which relate how women feel about their bodies to how they experience their broader health (table 1).

Associations of POSITIVE body image ¹	Associations of NEGATIVE body image ²
Higher self-esteem Positive eating behaviours Life satisfaction and flourishing Positive sexual experiences Increased physical activity regardless of BMI	Increased depressive symptoms Eating disorders / pathology Higher stress levels Greater loneliness Poorer quality friendships

Table 1. How positive and negative body image relate to broader wellbeing.

While the impact of Instagram on body image is well documented in the literature, how this relationship impacts broader wellbeing is less clearly understood.

To date, findings have been inconclusive on the impact of embedding positive body image messages and photos on Instagram on female user's mood and body image (table 2):

Type of positive message or image	Previous research findings
Inclusive representation	Exposure to a broader range of female body representations leads to more positive body image outcomes for women compared to exposure to ideal-body images.
Body positive messages	Adding body positive captions to appearance focused content suggests some potential benefits for weight esteem, but other research has suggested no overall effect for body image.
Disclaimers	Disclaimer labels, which indicate the edited or manufactured nature of an image, have been found to be ineffective for combating the negative impact of media images.
Social media literacy	Awareness that online images are often manipulated to improve physical attractiveness has shown some success for protecting body image online.
Self-compassion	Quotes posted to Instagram that encourage users to be more self-compassionate may provide a potential mechanism for protecting body image outcomes when engaging in appearance-focused Instagram use.

Table 2. Summary of previous research findings on the impact of embedding positive body image messages and photos on female Instagram user's mood and body image (Slater et al 2017; Davies et al 2020; Tiggemann 2022).

2 These research findings are summarised in written evidence submitted to the Health and Social Care Committee inquiry into the impact of body image on mental and physical health: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/1674/the-impact-of-body-image-on-mental-and-physical-health/publications/written-evidence/?SearchTerm=IBI0020&DateFrom=&DateTo=&SessionId>

THE STUDY

What we did

The study used two datasets, defined below as 'groups', to examine the relationship between body image and life satisfaction among female Instagram users.

Focusing on women aged 18-25, the study explored:

Group 1: the relationship between body image and wellbeing

Group 2: whether body-positive Instagram messaging leads to improvements in life satisfaction

Measures and analysis

Group 1

441 female Instagram users aged 18-25 completed an online questionnaire at the beginning of the study. This entailed self-report measures of body image, life satisfaction, Instagram use, state of negative mood, and Body Mass Index (BMI).

In order to capture how participants felt on a typical day, these measures were taken without asking participants to engage in Instagram use:

1. **Life satisfaction** – happiness or satisfaction with life as a whole defined using the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS)³.
2. **Body satisfaction** – happiness or satisfaction with body appearance.
3. **Face satisfaction** – happiness or satisfaction with facial appearance.
4. **Body shame** – critical awareness of, and internal evaluations of, one's own body
5. **Appearance comparison** – tendency to make appearance-based comparisons with others on- and offline.
6. **Self-criticism** – tendency to engage in self-critical thought processes.

Group 2

190 female social media users were asked to self-rate their life satisfaction level. They then viewed 24 Instagram posts containing fitspiration images known to increase negative mood, alongside images containing positive body image messages or appearance neutral images. Users were then asked to repeat the life satisfaction rating and the scores were compared.

Participants were split into five different conditions to complete the Instagram browsing task:

1. **Self-compassion** – eight self-compassion themed body image messages encouraging body positivity mixed in with 24 fitspiration posts.
2. **Satire** – eight satirical body image messages designed to poke fun at and critique typical online appearance pressures mixed in with 24 fitspiration posts.
3. **Neutral distractor** – eight images of inanimate objects not associated with physical appearance mixed with 24 fitspiration posts.
4. **Positive distractor** – eight images of cute pets intended to encourage positive emotions mixed with 24 fitspiration posts.
5. **Fitspiration** – a control condition containing just the 24 fitspiration posts, with no other distractor images.

3 A scale developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin (1985) to measure global life satisfaction. Scores correlate moderately to highly with other measures of subjective well-being <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/16367493/>

What did we find?

Key findings from group 1 (table 3):

- Women who felt more positively towards the appearance of their bodies also felt more satisfied with their lives in general.
- Women who were more self-critical were less satisfied with their lives overall.
- Women who felt more negative in terms of mood also felt less satisfied with their lives overall.
- Time spent on Instagram (self-reported) was not related to how satisfied participants felt with their lives.

Measures	Instagram use	BMI	Negative Mood	Trait Comparison	Body Satisfaction	Face Satisfaction	Body Shame	Trait Criticism
Life Satisfaction	.063	-.106*	-.557**	-.184**	.397**	.392**	-.359**	-.525**

* significant at the level of $p < .05$; ** significant at the level of $p < .001$

Table 3. Correlation coefficients between life satisfaction and the other variables (n = 441)

Key findings from group 2 (figure 1):

- Short-term exposure to images promoting unrealistic body ideals on Instagram led to reductions in life satisfaction.⁴
- Browsing fitspiration images alone led to a significant reduction in life satisfaction.
- Short-term exposure to body positive messages, alongside images promoting unrealistic body ideals on Instagram, did not benefit momentary life satisfaction indicating no single message/distractor type was more effective at protecting wellbeing than any of the others.

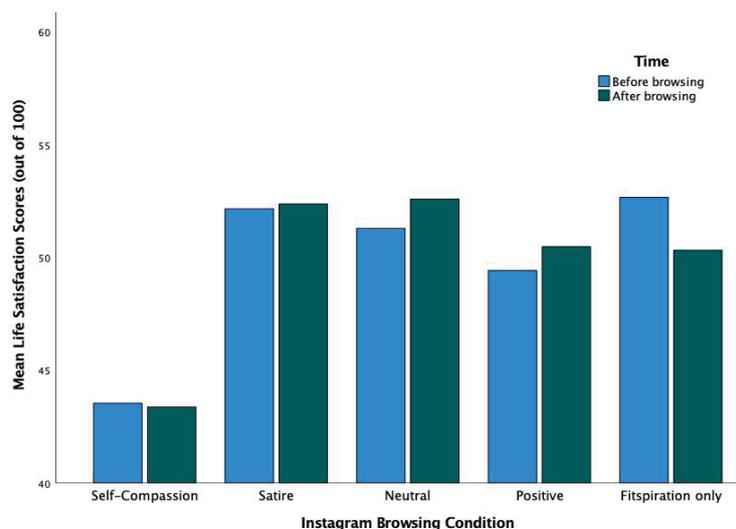


Figure 1. Changes in life satisfaction scores after the Instagram browsing task between the five-conditions.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

What does this mean in practice?

As the findings from group 1 were correlational, we cannot infer that improving body image will improve life satisfaction. However, the findings do suggest a link.

Findings from group 2 suggest that combining 'fitspiration' images with other types of imagery on Instagram may help to dilute the negative effect on female users' wellbeing.

4 This was statistically significant at the 0.05 level, ($p < .05$).

What we need to know more about

While this study focused on female body image, there has been an increase in negative body image among young men in recent years. Future studies should explore how the relationship between Instagram and body image impacts wellbeing, and whether body positive messaging leads to improvements in life satisfaction for all genders.

To determine whether online interventions targeting body image can positively impact broader wellbeing, further explorations are needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Based on the findings of our study, the following actions are recommended:

For researchers

- Further explore the impact of different types of health communication on Instagram and its relative impact on users' wellbeing.
- Explore efficacy of social media interventions that target body image and life satisfaction.
- Look at the impact of male orientated appearance ideals and health communication on subjective wellbeing among male social media users.
- Look to employ or develop more naturalistic methods for assessing the impact of Instagram (and health related information) on life satisfaction, for example ecological momentary assessment.
- Explore the impact of other types of appearance-focused Instagram content (e.g. selfies) on levels of life satisfaction.
- Further examine the importance of online appearance pressures to wellbeing, by investigating the mechanisms underpinning how Instagram impacts body image and life satisfaction.
- Examine whether social comparisons made with appearance and lifestyle have an impact on the relationship between fitspiration exposure and life satisfaction.
- Expand scope to explore impact of body image for all genders.

For policymakers

- Formulate clear guidance/regulations on how images and messages about body image can be communicated positively online using the evidence that is available.

For information on how the evidence in this briefing has been used by the cross-party Health and Social Care Committee read the evidence submission [here](#).



Suggested citation: Davies B., 2022. Body image and women's wellbeing [online] What Works Centre for Wellbeing, available at: <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/resources/body-image-and-womens-wellbeing>

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