Say 'no' to that golden glow: Social media helps stop unhealthy tanning

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There's no such thing as a healthy tan. Yet despite the known risks of skin cancer, summer always sees thousands of sun lovers heading to the beach in the search of that perfect golden glow and challenging the 'tanned ideal' is an uphill battle.

Now, breakthrough research from the University of South Australia is

showing how social media interventions can swiftly change people'sattitudes and behaviours to tanning, providing new strategies for skin cancer education and prevention.

Lead researcher, UniSA's Dr. John Mingoia says this is the first study to disseminate media literacy education on a social networking site to address skin cancer risk factors.

"Social media is a great influencer, both positively and negatively," Dr. Mingoia says.

"On the one hand, it can expose people to unrealistic and unsafe body ideals, such as tanned skin; yet on the other hand, it can be extremely effective in turning these beliefs around to encourage better sun-safe behaviours, as well as health and beauty ideals."

The UniSA research assessed the impact of daily interactive Facebook posts – incorporating a combination of photos, videos, infographics and text about the risks of tanning – to a group of 84 Caucasian women, aged 18-29 years, over a two-week period.

The posts included: a model sharing her experience of the true cost of posting ideal photos on social media to her physical and psychological health; images of women pre and post tanning as they aged; what goes into the perfect selfie; and images that showed the process of digital editing.

Exposure to these interventions increased participants' critical thinking and scepticism of images presented on social media and decreased their desire for tanned skin. It specifically found that participants were significantly less inclined to internalise a 'tanned ideal', to engage in self-comparisons with images on social media, and to engage in tanning activities.

Dr. Mingoia says the research addresses growing concerns that health messages about tanning and skin cancer are not reaching young Australian women.

"A glowing tan is still seen by many as a healthy ideal," Dr. Mingoia says, "All you have to do is scroll through your social media feed to be inundated by tanned, smiling faces of models and celebrities.

"Images like these make young women believe that tanned skin is healthier and more beautiful than pale skin and, as a result, they're intentionally rejecting sun protection messages.

"The danger for youth is that they believe they're infallible; the reality is skin cancer does not discriminate."

Tanning is a sign that your skin has been exposed to UV radiation, with sunburn causing 95 per cent of melanomas, the most deadly form of skin cancer. One in eight adults and one in five teenagers in Australia are sunburnt on an average summer weekend.

Across Australia, more than 2000 people die from skin cancer each year, with the Cancer Council estimating that Australia spends more than $1 billion per year treating the disease. Alarmingly, the Cancer Council also found that that 67 per cent of girls believe their friends think a tan is a good thing.

Dr. Mingoia says that as most skin cancers are preventable via good sun protection, the ongoing desire for a tan is concerning.

"It's vital that we find effective means to address and change the harmful tanning beliefs and behaviours of Australians. Through this study, we've made important headway to show how social media can change how people think about tanning and how it can contribute to ongoing skin

cancer prevention efforts."

Provided by University of South Australia